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ABSTRACT

The National College Counseling Project (NCCP), formed in September 1983, examined the status of college counseling in schools across the country. Specifically, the goal was to learn what role college counseling plays in enhancing student aspirations for a satisfying future, as well as in helping students gain admission to the college most suitable for them. The first stage of inquiry was a comprehensive survey of counseling practices across the country. A mail survey was sent in the spring of 1984 to 2,200 randomly selected high schools and responses from 1,140 schools were analyzed in late 1984. During the second phase in 1985, 115 schools with exemplary counseling programs were identified and their practices examined. The third phase, carried out between January and June 1986, involved site visits to 13 schools nominated from the 115 of the previous phase, and chosen for their excellent programs and representation of the diversity of American education. This document provides details and findings of this project. Topics covered include: (1) defining college counseling practices and the influence of family income; (2) factors contributing to a model environment for effective college counseling; (3) practices that enhance the college counseling process; and (4) specific recommendations to schools striving for excellence in college counseling. (ABL)

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NATIONAL COLLEGE COUNSELING PROJECT

FRONTIERS OF POSSIBILITY

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FRONTIERS OF POSSIBILITY

Report of the
NATIONAL COLLEGE COUNSELING PROJECT

David R. Holmes	Herbert F. Dalton, Jr.	David G. Erdmann	Thomas C. Hayden	Alton O. Roberts
University of Vermont	Middlebury College	Rollins College	Phillips Exeter Academy	University of Vermont

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Sponsored by the National Association of College Admissions Counselors

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Finally, we would like to extend our deepest appreciation and admiration to all who work, often under difficult circumstances, with America's youth in helping to form their life decisions.

FOREWORD

David Riesman

Henry Ford II Professor of Social Science
Harvard University

Because I have been for many years a student of higher education, parents and sometimes their children ask my advice concerning colleges, usually with a very local orbit in mind among the academic "best buys." Often I seek to talk to the young people alone, their parents absent. If I am to be helpful, I want to learn something about the potential applicant's interests as well as get a sense of his or her talents. Since I know little about particular schools, the PSAT scores, verbal and mathematical, can contribute to my understanding. Frequently I find myself in touch with parents extremely ambitious for their children, and there are of course many cases where colleges of the highest prestige have neither the ethos nor the specific academic programs most appropriate for their particular offspring. In such instances the test scores (now subject to an incessant barrage from critics for their alleged cultural, racial, economic, or other bias) are useful in defending the student against the parents or in a few cases against the ambitions of the school, which naturally wants to report that its students have attained the most selective colleges. There are contrasting instances where parents may have their own reasons for not wanting their child to rise "too high" above their own level or, especially an issue for young women, above more favored and generally older siblings. Here, too, the test scores may be useful leverage against a parent's self-oriented misjudgement.

In these relatively infrequent encounters, I am acutely conscious of how problematic would be my situation were I a school counselor. This useful report, among its other contributions, explores the dilemmas faced by high school college counselors, whose training, tasks, and settings are succinctly illuminated. It is no wonder that among the characteristics noted in *Frontiers of Possibility* that distinguish outstanding college counselors, political savvy is among them. Not only must the counselor, particularly the head counselor, be able to persuade others to provide the resources and networks of support for programs and (if need be) for students, but "at the same time, the counselor must be skillful at avoiding the political minefields that lie outside the door, whether it is influential parents who insist that their child go to an Ivy League school, or parents who fear that the program serves only already committed college-preparatory students."

In fact, a good deal of *Frontiers of Possibility* is devoted to disparities in the provision of college preparatory counseling, the expected ones like income (which also often means race and ethnicity) but also in the amount of attention to the college-bound. The Report cautions against giving too much attention to those headed for the relatively small number of heavily overapplied colleges where test scores and grades along with visible and reportable personal qualities are requisite to being considered "college material." Wise counselors know, of course, what much of the educated public does not grasp, namely, that most colleges and universities outside a very small circle of distinguished private ones and those Richard Moll terms "the Public Ivys," are not sufficiently overapplied to be notably selective, although they may use test scores for placement once a student matriculates.

The political savvy requisite for counselors is also helpful to them in their capacity as effective leaders in settings where there is now increasing pressure to improve the preparation of school teachers and school principals, but little attempt to appreciate the work counselors do.

Frontiers of Possibility makes clear how highly motivated and voraciously hardworking many of them are—and how subtle and difficult the task is. Adept college counselors can do much to lift the morale of an entire school, and *Frontiers of Possibility* cites instances of inventive accomplishment by counselors such as one in West Virginia, who went to the school board against the wishes of his principal to make the case for a summer school course for students who had flunked a college-prep science course. As this example illustrates, the authors believe that the good counselor is an advocate for the students in the community, within the school, and with parents and other influentials. To be sure, an empathetic (but not invariably sympathetic) counselor will not permit manipulation by young people, whose skills in this art, often trained at home, get a refresher course with each additional year of schooling!

The National College Counseling Project discovered its capable and cogent counselors in the first instance through surveys and then through more ethnographic site visits, employing interviews and looking at counselors' records and their management of these, including their varying abilities to keep track of where their former students have landed, how they may have fared, and what the changes are in the expectations of particular magnet colleges.* In "Why Asians Are Going to the Head of the Class," Fox Butterfield reports in the Education Life section of the *New York Times* (August 3, 1986, Section 12, at p. 22), Asian American parents, fearing that there are quotas to limit their numbers despite (or perhaps because of) their remarkable academic aptitudes, especially in the quantitative areas, want to know what else their children ought to proffer to have a good chance of entry to Stanford or the Ivy League.

The authors of *Frontiers of Possibility* observe that in the reports of the last few years such as *A Nation at Risk* and in the general public concern about what is wrong with our precollegiate education, much attention has been paid to how one can enhance the status and professionalism of teaching, but virtually none concerning the preparation of the less visible counselors.

For 25 years I have had the benefit of participating in the Admissions Institute which the College Board runs at Harvard under the management of Dean Whitla, Harvard's Director of Instructional Research and Evaluation. Each time, I come away impressed with the quality of the counselors, their ability to listen and also to question, their perseverance in the face of the ethical and practical-political dilemmas they regularly encounter, and their unwavering respect for young people and willingness to go to bat for them. The Admissions Institute is a small contribution to the professionalization or in-service education of college counselors. *Frontiers of Possibility* makes a further significant contribution.

David Riesman

Cambridge, Massachusetts
9 August 1986

* The focus of the research was on the four-year colleges and universities, although there is a short segment which avoids the usual practice of deprecating community colleges, whether out of academic snobbery or out of Left Wing belief that these colleges were created and persist to maintain privilege and stratification in post-secondary education. *Frontiers of Possibility* acknowledges that, for example, Hispanics in a rural Texas school may find a community college to be a useful trial step en route to further higher education, rather than a barrier.

The counselor is available to parents and kids. The hand is there reaching out. Take it!

A parent in West Virginia

Success comes to those who dare to challenge.

A teacher in Michigan

For the first time, a flame begins to burn, the student and parents sense that maybe it is possible.

A counselor in California

We want the students, to have a good day here, so that then they can face what they have to at home and in the world outside.

A principal in Maine

I

Introduction

The crisis in American secondary schooling is not over, but the battleground has shifted. Just three years ago Americans heard that the quality of our schools had plunged to unacceptable levels. The report of the National Commission on Excellence, *A Nation at Risk*, stated that we have been "committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament." Ernest Boyer's Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement for Teaching asserted that there exists an "alarming gap between school achievement and the task to be accomplished." Boyer pointed to a "deep erosion of confidence in our schools, coupled with disturbing evidence that at least some of the skepticism is justified." The immediate and most important effect of these and other reports in the 1983–1984 period was to alert policy-makers, citizens, and educational professionals to the need for reform.

National Concern

A gratifying aspect of this heightened sense of national concern about educational quality is that American institutions at every level—local, state, and federal—have responded. The American penchant for action has once again come to the fore. Equally important, as the dialogue has expanded, the critics have become more thoughtful, more focused and more measured in their actions. Indeed, as thoughtful observers have moved away from finding cracks in the foundation and impatiently sending forth rash solutions, they have come to some important realizations.

The most significant realization reaffirms something educators had taken for granted in an earlier historical era: each school is a unique environment, with its own culture, needs, and avenues of change. John Goodlad in his useful analysis of schooling in America, *A Place Called School*, notes that there has been "some shift away from the proposition that schools are most likely to be changed by mandates and strategies emanating from Washington or state capitals." He urges us to focus on the "one place where all the elements come together. This is the individual school. If we are to improve it, we must understand it. If we are to improve schooling, we must improve individual schools." Although they do not reject the potential importance of public policy initiatives, Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot in *The Good High School* and Theodore Sizer in *Horace's Compromise* also argue for the centrality and integrity of the individual school. Most thoughtful reformers understand that the school itself is the arena of action that is most likely to improve the quality of education in America.

A second significant realization, building on the first, is that each of several important elements of a school—singly and in concert with other elements—must be addressed in any serious reform attempt. Those who know schools best were the first to make this point. A prominent example was the paper issued by the National Association of College Admissions

Counselors (NACAC) in May 1984. In *Counseling: A Facet of Excellence*, NACAC noted that an influential 1959 study of the American high school by James Bryant Conant emphasized the important role of the counselor in enhancing school quality. In contrast, the reports and calls to action of the early eighties, NACAC pointed out, virtually ignore the important role of the counselor. The NACAC paper went on to suggest why, in the myopic vision of some commentators, counselors had become "dispensible." A major purpose of the paper was to "underscore a compelling need to support the school counselor with money, time, commitment, and an appreciation of the significant role he or she can play in raising student expectation and improving the quality of education in American schools."

National College Counseling Project

A few months prior to the publication of the NACAC paper, we came to the same conclusion. Drawing on our professional experience in college admissions, secondary school counseling, and university-level educational research, we noted the many pitfalls and inconsistencies of student transition from high school to college. Furthermore, we noted that most of the national reports ignored the school counselor's role in the crucial processes of student development and transition. By forming the National College Counseling Project (NCCP) in September 1983, we set out to rectify this neglect by examining the status of college counseling in schools across the country. Specifically, the goal was to learn what role college counseling plays in enhancing student aspirations for a satisfying future, as well as in helping students gain admission to the most suitable college for them.

The first stage of inquiry was a comprehensive survey of counseling practices across the country. As described in detail in the next two sections, a mail survey was sent during the spring of 1984 to 2200 randomly selected high schools. Responses from the head college counselors of 1140 schools were analyzed and reported in a preliminary fashion in late 1984.

With grants from two foundations and generous sponsorship and financial support from NACAC, the second phase of the project began in early 1985. Field Researchers, recruited from schools across the nation, identified schools with exemplary counseling practices and collected information about each of these schools and their counseling programs.

The third phase, carried out between January and June 1986, involved site visits to thirteen schools selected from the list of 115 exemplary schools nominated in the previous phase by the Field Researchers. The schools to be visited were selected from among the highest rated schools with excellent college counseling programs and for what they might offer to other schools across the country. Within the limitation of the small number to receive visits, we chose schools representing the diversity that characterizes education in America. Such factors as school type (urban, suburban, or rural), region of the country, size, family income profile, racial composition, and control (public or private) weighed heavily in the selection of the schools we were to visit.

The Project Directors collected and analyzed an abundance of information, both quantitative and qualitative in nature. Preliminary reports of our findings, along with this report, have been reviewed by fellow scholars, practicing school professionals, and members of the NCCP Advisory Board. This

report culminates the first stage of efforts by the NCCP, in concert with NACAC and other entities, to enhance the impact that the school counselor may have on the educational experience and direction of American secondary students.

Accentuating the Positive as a Reform Strategy

In examining the breadth and depth of counseling practices across the country, one cannot ignore the many imposing obstacles a student may face in achieving educational goals. National reports and daily news stories confirm the existence of schools mired in cycles of self-perpetuating failure, especially those schools serving lower income minority families. We know, too, that the nation's fastest growing populations are Hispanics, blacks, and Asian Americans. At the same time that minority populations are growing relative to whites at the secondary level, the percentage of collegebound minority students has dropped significantly. If one grants that college attendance continues to represent the most promising avenue of upward mobility in our society, a major challenge for these schools and communities is to convince students that (as a counselor in an inner city Texas school phrased it) "college is a distinct and definite possibility and not just for the rich kids."

The task of raising aspirations is crucial not only to inner city minority schools but also to many rural schools drawing students from lower income white families. Many rural schools are removed from the mainstream of contemporary American society: incomes are low, local economies are in decline, cultural opportunities are limited, and a sense of stagnation pervades the school and the community. It is no wonder that a "college consciousness" is often lacking among a majority of these schools and students. In its recent interim report, the College Board's Commission on Precollege Guidance and Counseling addressed the challenge of raising the college consciousness of students facing these and many other kinds of disadvantages:

> Long before students start thinking about going to college, their success in academic learning and their accompanying emotional and social development combine to influence their choices and opportunities for higher education. Schools at every level, therefore, have a special role, along with students' families, in moving adolescents toward a full realization of the qualities important to success in postsecondary education.

The task may be reasonably clear, but the obstacles are great. Too often it is tempting to dwell on the difficulty—perhaps the impossibility—of accomplishing the task.

In carrying out our work, the NCCP has alligned itself with the posture of commentators such as Sarah Lightfoot who have criticized the tendency of social scientists—and many educational "reformers"—to dwell on the negative and on what is wrong. We believed at the outset of our work, and have subsequently confirmed in our research, that there are schools of every description that exhibit exemplary programs and practices. Many of these programs are succeeding in the face of seemingly insurmountable barriers. For example, a predominantly minority school in California has carved out a hopeful future in the face of neighborhood violence and a mentality of defeatism. It now sends 79% of its seniors on to higher education. Mindful

of successes of this kind, we believe that educators want to hear about promising practices and how to improve. They do not want, or need, to hear more about what is wrong. Indeed, as we visited schools across the country and communicated with hundreds of other educators, we found an enthusiasm for learning about how to employ new ideas and practices. Thus, our fundamental assumption is that college counselors (and other school leaders) want to improve what they are doing and, under the right conditions, are capable of taking progressive steps. Not only do we have evidence to support this proposition, but we believe that taking this approach is the only feasible way to elicit positive change.

A Blueprint for Change

The primary purpose of this report is to improve the quality of college counseling by sparking analysis, debate, and initiatives. We asked hundreds of counselors across the country about their work; we asked school professionals to identify and describe outstanding practices and programs; and we probed deeply into thirteen schools. We begin our report with a description of our method of inquiry and with the results of the National Survey which helped us define the dimensions of the problem. Our major findings, however, look to the future. They focus, first, on aspects of an environment conducive to providing effective college counseling and, second, on practices that enhance the college counseling process. Considering our finding that the counselor plays—or is capable of playing—a significant role in school improvement, the audience of this report should include not only school counselors and college admissions staff but also principals, superintendents, school board members, teachers, and parents.

NACAC and the Commission on Precollege Guidance and Counseling attribute the neglect of counseling in the reform literature to many factors, including a decline of professional status among counselors, the tendency of financially pinched school boards to look first to the guidance and counseling area for fiscal reductions, and the tendency for counselors to take on school roles that detract from their basic counseling functions. While we found that these forces exist to a significant degree across the country, we are able to report that the essential role of guidance and counseling, including college counseling, is recognized and supported more widely than we anticipated. This is especially true among schools on a trajectory of improvement.

Whether in a demoralized school emerging from the throes of defeat or in an already effective school moving to a higher level of attainment, schools on the move recognize the crucial role of the counselor. Also, we found that schools on the move recognize the importance of raising student aspirations toward higher education. While James Bryant Conant's vision of the counselor's role is not yet a reality across the nation, we believe it still represents the best view of what is important and attainable. Most importantly, we now believe that this frontier of possibility exists realistically for every school and every student.

II

Methods of Inquiry

In setting out to learn about college counseling practices across the country and to suggest avenues of improvement, we confronted several important choices in how to approach the task. These choices concerned such issues as the variety of school situations in America, breadth versus depth of inquiry, selection of respondents with reliable information about counseling and the dynamics of schools, and a definition of "exemplary" college counseling. Our solutions were influenced by two primary research goals: (1) our desire to study, to the degree possible, the range of prototypical school situations across the nation and (2) our resolve to reach findings that would be credible and useful for practitioners, especially counselors and principals. Stated differently, we didn't want to miss anything of significance nationally and, of utmost importance, we wanted to derive maximum practical benefit from the time and resources at our disposal. We formed an Advisory Board of prominent men and women in fields connected with the Project to consult with the Project Directors on these decisions.

Counselors as Reporters

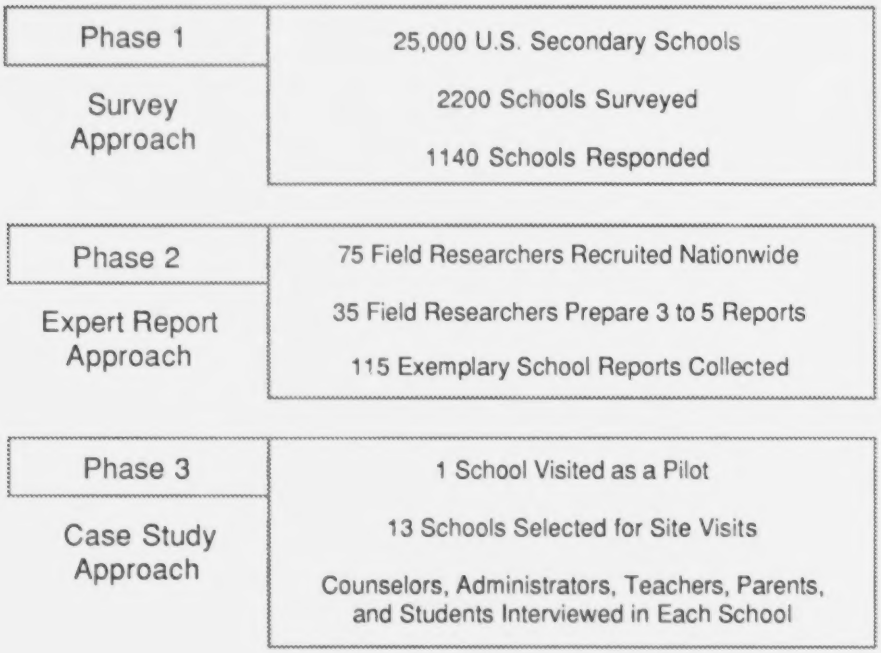
We decided to rely primarily on counselors themselves to tell us about counseling practices and programs. While this makes obvious good sense, there were many questions about the ability of counselors to convey accurately and objectively the reality of their situations. Were counselors able to appreciate the problems of principals and school boards? Were counselors too emotionally involved to evaluate reliably their own programs? Were counselors too concerned with their professional status to look with an open mind to the larger mission of the school? We can say now that our decision was appropriate. The response of counselors at each stage of our research was enthusiastic, conscientious, and substantive. We were amazed by the hundreds of respondents who went beyond the request for information and provided substantial and important commentary. When we visited individual schools and talked with a variety of constituencies, we discovered again and again that what we had learned from counselors was borne out by testimony from other sources. Our overall conclusion is that most counselors are knowledgeable and committed professionals seeking to improve their effectiveness and the quality of schooling. The direct benefit that accrued to us was that the counselors were superb sources of information and insight as we carried out our research.

Research Design

Our pragmatic instincts led us to combine, rather than choose between, breadth of coverage and depth of information. We accomplished this by emphasizing breadth in the first stage of our research and by emphasizing depth and richness of information in the second and third stages. Indeed, the progression through three successive stages of inquiry represented a focusing process. We began with a statistical survey approach (large sample size, representativeness, and primarily quantitative information) and progressed to a case study approach (with targeted inquiries eliciting informa-

tion of a more qualitative nature about individual schools). We visited 13 schools selected from 115 schools identified as exemplary by 35 Field Researchers. Most of our Field Researchers were selected from among 1140 counselors who responded to our national survey of 2200 counselors. The sample of 2200 was selected randomly from the 25,000 schools in the files of the College Board. Figure 1 presents this information graphically .

Figure 1. National College Counseling Project Research Design


Phase 1
Survey Approach
25,000 U.S. Secondary Schools
2200 Schools Surveyed
1140 Schools Responded
Phase 2
Expert Report Approach
75 Field Researchers Recruited Nationwide
35 Field Researchers Prepare 3 to 5 Reports
115 Exemplary School Reports Collected
Phase 3
Case Study Approach
1 School Visited as a Pilot
13 Schools Selected for Site Visits
Counselors, Administrators, Teachers, Parents, and Students Interviewed in Each School

An important goal was to study representative *types* of schools across the country. Using the prior work of researchers such as James Coleman and John Goodlad, we included family income profile, school size, white/non-white proportions, urban/suburban/ rural location, public/private control, and geographic area. The randomly selected sample of our national survey was representative of the country as a whole on each of these dimensions. The identification and recruitment of Field Researchers, however, presented an inherent dilemma. We recruited our Field Researchers on the basis of (1) reputation and experience in the field, (2) geographic dispersion, and (3) their willingness to participate. We asked them to nominate (and gather information about) exemplary college counseling programs. As a result, we had no guarantee that the list of schools nominated would provide adequate coverage of our six stratification factors. Fortunately, the nominated schools presented an excellent array of demographic characteristics, which in turn facilitated our selection of thirteen schools to visit. Each school we visited during the first half of 1986 was selected, in part, for the degree to which the school helped us achieve coverage across the six selection criteria. Table 1 presents profiles of our sample:

Table 1. Profiles of Exemplary Schools Selected for Site Visits

School Type	Location	Percent White	Senior Class Size	% of Seniors Attending College
Lower Income Urban	CA	11%	550	79%
Lower Income Urban	TX	15%	375	70%
Lower Income Rural/Small City	WV	98%	200	48%
Lower Income Rural	ME	99%	60	84%
Middle Income Suburban	PA	95%	670	60%
Middle Income Suburban	MI	20%	205	49%
Middle Income Suburban	VA	35%	750	69%
Middle Income Small City	CA	99%	375	60%
Upper Income Suburban	MI	95%	200	94%
Upper Income Suburban	OH	98%	160	90%
Middle Income Private (Catholic)	VT	99%	100	86%
Upper Income Private	FL	98%	145	99%
Upper Income Private (Catholic)	NY	79%	150	99%

We also considered the percentage of students going on to higher education. Although we were looking for schools with exemplary college counseling programs (which suggested that college-going rates would be high), we sought variation in college attendance rates. Having accounted for the six primary stratification factors, we found that variations in college attendance

rates fell into place nicely. Rates varied from 99% at a private school in Florida to 48% at a lower income school in West Virginia. This variation is consistent with our survey finding that college attendance rates correlate with the family income profile of a school (see Section III of this report).

Our sample of schools does not reflect the actual number of schools nationally in each major category (low income/urban, low income/rural, middle income/suburban, upper income/suburban, upper income/private). For example, the proportion of rural schools in the country is significantly greater than the 15% share (2 out of 13) suggested by our sample. However, in this case study approach, the research goal was to visit at least two schools in each major category.

What is Exemplary?

The most challenging conceptual problem we faced in designing the study was a satisfactory working definition of *exemplary*. The directions to our Field Researchers included the following statement:

> Your first task will be to select the schools you believe have outstanding programs in college counseling and the college selection process. This may include programs as a whole or specific elements of a program that are effective. For this project a "successful" program is one which helps students make appropriate decisions with which they are satisfied. It does not necessarily mean sending the most students to the best colleges. You should do your selection of schools based on your own professional knowledge and expertise. You may wish to consult with other professionals or groups in your area.

The quality of the college decision process for students remained the central focus of our research. As we probed more deeply, however, and talked with field researchers and experts across the country, the difficulty of using a single definition of *exemplary* or *outstanding* became evident. There are no commonly accepted criteria for defining these terms. Depending on one's perspective, each of the following standards has appeal as a basis for judging college counseling, and one or more of them was used to select schools as exemplary:

- The program exhibits many high quality practices (manuals, computer programs, workshops, etc.)
- The program does outstanding things with limited resources; it is efficient and resourceful.
- The program sends a high percentage of students to selective colleges.
- The program is successful beyond expectations based on the family income profile of the school (as measured by the percentage of students going on to college).
- Students (and parents) report a high degree of satisfaction with the assistance they receive and the choices they make.
- The program has made significant progress in its effectiveness in a short span of time.
- Colleagues in other schools have seen and used the program and its staff

as models for program improvements.

At the November 1985 meeting of our Advisory Board, Dean Whitla, a highly regarded researcher at Harvard University, suggested an approach to our confounding array of definitions. Paraphrasing Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, Whitla noted, "While I can't define exemplary college counseling, I know it when I see it." With the advice of our Advisory Board, we adopted a stance that assumed that (1) there are multiple useful definitions, and (2) for our purposes, the experts in the schools—the Field Researchers—were best equipped to identify exemplary practices and programs. After studying the 115 reports submitted by our Field Researchers and visiting thirteen schools, we are convinced that there are many common elements among "exemplary" programs. In the final analysis, however, the term must be defined in the context of a particular school's situation and goals. Our report proceeds from this assumption.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Phase One

With support from the University of Vermont and an educational publisher (Peterson's Guides), a survey form was designed and printed. The Project Directors consulted with professional colleagues in the design of the questionnaire, some of whom were later appointed to the Project Advisory Board. The survey form was to be completed by the "Head College Counselor" at high schools across the country. The questionnaire consisted of 54 questions, five of which required a narrative response. It requested information about the school and community, including family income profile, racial make-up of the student body, and percentage of students going on to various types of postsecondary education. In addition, we asked for information about counseling practices, about trends in resources devoted to college counseling, and program effectiveness.

The survey was mailed on April 15, 1984, to 2200 schools that were selected by a computerized random process from a list of approximately 25,000 secondary schools across the country. A follow-up survey was mailed to non-respondents four weeks later. By early summer, 1140 college counselors had returned questionnaires for a response rate of 51.8 percent. This was a very successful return rate for a survey of this kind and seemed to indicate a high level of interest in the topic.

A computerized analysis of the data was carried out by the Instructional Development Center at the University of Vermont. The analysis included (1) frequency distributions for all questions, (2) Pearson correlation coefficients, (3) cross-tabulations of the survey's questions, and (4) a content analysis of the survey's five open-ended questions. Over the next few weeks the Project Directors reviewed the data and met to discuss the survey's most significant findings. During the summer and fall of 1984, preliminary findings were reported in the media, including the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Education Week* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. The Project Directors reported progress and preliminary findings at the October 1984 NACAC National Conference in Boston.

Phase Two

During March 1985 NACAC, in cooperation with the Teagle Foundation, awarded sponsorship and generous financial support for the next phases of the project. Drawing on expressions of interest in the project and names referred to us by experts in the field, we invited seventy-five counselors representing every state and region of the country to serve as Field Researchers. With agreements from over fifty, we mailed detailed instructions and materials to the prospective Field Researchers during April and early May. We asked each Field Researcher to nominate up to five schools in their area with exemplary college counseling programs. We defined *area* to mean all schools, public and private, in the Field Researcher's telephone area code. In addition, the Field Researchers were instructed to become sufficiently familiar with the school to gather critical information about each nominated school, including information about demographic variables, the college counseling program, evidence of program effectiveness, and future challenges. An important instruction was the following:

> The most important part of your report (and, we hope, the most enjoyable) is your description of the program and what makes it exemplary. Be objective and descriptive. Remember that the people who read this may not be familiar with terminology or traditions in the school you are discussing.

We provided the Field Researchers with an eight-page form on which to enter school and program information, and asked them to return their summary forms along with the program materials gathered from the schools by the end of June 1985.

By September we had received 115 school nominations and packets of materials from 35 Field Researchers. The five Project Directors read and analyzed each of the school reports with an eye toward (1) collating information about exemplary college counseling practices and (2) identifying schools for possible visits during the spring of 1986. As noted above, we were satisfied with the quality of the information we received and the distribution of the nominated schools in terms of geography, demographic factors, and school type.

A preliminary list of twelve schools to receive visits was submitted to the Project Advisory Board in November 1985. After considerable discussion and a few substitutions, thirteen schools were selected.

Phase Three

Benefiting from several informal visits to schools and a structured pilot visit to a large high school near Boston, we developed a protocol for the thirteen site visits. Between January and June 1986, visits were carried out according to the following protocol:

- Each visiting team included two Project Directors and a secondary school counselor from a nearby school.
- One of the Project Directors served as Chair for the visit and had responsibility for arranging the visit, assuring coverage of important areas of inquiry, and preparing the final version of the report of the visit.
- The head counselor of the school was requested to set up a schedule of interviews with counseling staff, teachers, school principal and other key

administrators, students, and parents. We wanted to speak to the same constituencies in each school to get a good cross-section of information.

- The counselor was asked to provide the visiting team with (1) data from the last three years on college attendance rates for graduating seniors and (2) all materials given to students, parents, and colleges concerning the college decision process.

- The visit to the school began with an evening dinner meeting attended by the three person team and the head counselor.

- The following day (typically from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.) interviews were scheduled. Interviews were conducted in small groups (3–10 people) and usually lasted an hour.

- Using a semi-structured interview approach, the team employed a Site Visit Guide to record information. The interview agenda (1) verified profile information about the school and the counseling program; (2) probed the dynamics of the college counseling program, including processes, schedules, activities, and outcomes; (3) investigated, in detail, features of the program that are unique or particularly noteworthy; (4) determined the roles of the principal, teachers, and parents; (5) described the environment of the school in relation to the college counseling process; and (6) determined how the program came to be exemplary (i.e., *What was the process of change and improvement?*). We specifically looked for aspects of the program or the change process that might be exportable to other schools.

- Each interview included specific questions but also allowed time for open-ended responses and group interaction. We probed consistently to find out how the program addresses the needs of less assertive students and parents, especially those who by virtue of their socioeconomic background or history are typically uninvolved in the college decision process.

- A Project Director assumed major responsibility for taking extensive notes. The local counselor serving on the team was requested to submit observations in writing.

- The Chair prepared a final report on the counseling program at the school, using all the various forms of available information on the school.

Data Analysis

During June 1986 each Project Director reviewed the file of information on each of the thirteen schools, data from Phases One and Two, and short concept papers that had been written by individual directors on themes of special interest. The project team met for three days to identify the major findings and plan the dissemination of this information. Our methods of inquiry have provided abundant information about the dynamics of schools, about college counseling practices, and about how schools can strive to enhance the quality of the college decision process. Perhaps most significantly, we discovered that there are schools in this country, ranging from the inner city to the rural, where excitement is high, the passion for excellence is keen, and outcomes for students are gratifying.

III

The National Survey: Defining the Problem

Our spring 1984 National College Counseling Survey provided a snapshot of college counseling as it exists in all types of schools and in every region of the country. The school was the primary unit of analysis and, as such, we derived (or verified) a useful set of insights about America's schools. The resulting picture of schools and college counseling practices helped define the nature of the challenge as we set out to study and enhance the college decision process. This section presents factors that we believe shape college counseling in America.

SCHOOLS

School Size

The range of size among high schools is similar to the situation in higher education. Approximately four-fifths of college students attend one-fifth of the country's 3000 colleges and universities. Despite the diversity of American higher education, it is evident that the vast majority of our students attend large universities that are organized in a similar manner. Likewise, a significant proportion of high school students attend a relatively small number of schools enrolling 2000 or more students, most of which are in large cities or in nearby suburbs. Similar to the higher education situation, the remaining students attend schools that are small, diverse in their characteristics, and dispersed across the nation's many small cities and towns. Looking at the 1140 schools of our survey respondents, we found that more than half (53%) of the high schools are small—they enroll 500 or fewer students. (Approximately a quarter of the schools enroll fewer than 200 students.) If our respondents reflect the structure of secondary schools in America, this means that the senior class of over half the nation's schools contains fewer than 125 students. This profile is similar to the information available from other sources on American high schools, including the 1982 report by James Coleman, *High School Achievement*.

Any examination of American high schools must include this diversity of size, especially if one adopts the assumption that size has an important influence on school culture and on the possibility of inducing profound change. Should our investigation have focused primarily on the schools with the most students? Obviously, a failing inner city school of 2000 students adversely affects many more students than a failing school of 400 students in a rural community. As noted previously, we took a comprehensive perspective and chose to study all major types and sizes of schools.

We concluded that (1) there were likely to be many common elements across all types and sizes of high schools and (2) as one counselor said to us, "Good practice is where you find it." Thus, there was reason to believe that effective practices might be useful to other schools, regardless of size.

College Attendance

The survey produced useful information on college attendance patterns across the country. While, overall, about half of the nation's graduating seniors go on within a year to a two- or four-year college, our survey indicated that, for many schools, attendance at a four-year institution is not the norm. Three-quarters (78%) of the responding high schools send 50% or fewer of their students to four-year colleges. Since the media sometimes leave the impression that going to a four-year college is the prevailing pattern in America, these statistics are worthy of mention. Specifically, it is important to know that the challenge to college counseling is both finding a good collegiate fit for those already planning on college and, even more critically, raising the aspirations and preparation of thousands of other students so that college becomes a realistic possibility. We will report in Section IV on schools in California, Texas, West Virginia, and Maine that have taken on this task.

Two-Year Colleges

Although the four-year institution represents for most Americans the most direct route to social and economic well-being, the importance of two-year institutions should not be minimized. A fifth of the schools in our sample send more than 30% of their seniors directly on to two-year colleges. Only 4% of the schools in the study send more than half their students to a two-year college. While these proportions from the National Survey may seem small, our visits to schools indicated that, in some settings, the two-year college has a crucial role to play as an educational "trial step" for families with no previous experience in higher education.

Example from the site visits: In an inner city Texas high school with a predominantly Hispanic student population, we found that many parents who know little of college and the mysteries of the admissions process look to the less threatening, more modest step to a two-year college. Ignoring for the moment the question of whether the two-year college is an ideal fit for all of the students choosing this option, our research suggests that a local, low-cost community college may represent a realistic transitional step for many students who are only beginning to develop a "college consciousness." The implications of this proposition for college counseling were explored in our school visits.

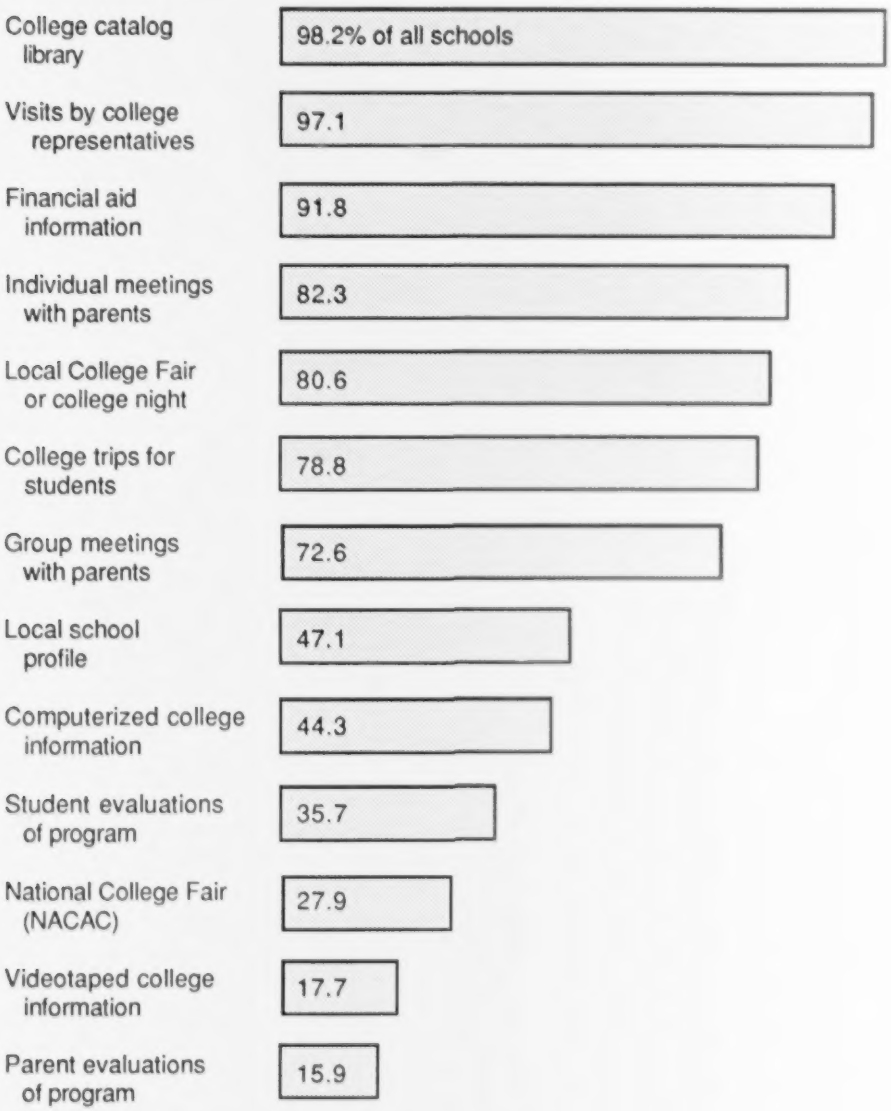
COLLEGE COUNSELING PRACTICES

Before discussing how college counseling practices are influenced by the economic profile of the school, we must examine the overall college counseling situation across the country. We found that the vast majority of high schools have in place the basic elements of a college counseling program. Virtually all schools reported that they offer a reference library of college catalogues (98%), visits to the school by college representatives (97%), and printed information on college financial aid (92%). Also, most schools offer individual meetings with parents about college (82%), a local college fair or

college night (81%), trips to nearby colleges (79%), and group meetings with parents (73%). Figure 2 summarizes data for the full list of counseling practices.

As positive as these numbers may be, an extrapolation of these percentages to the country as a whole raises some disturbing questions. Is it possible that 450 of our nation's high schools (1.8% of 25,000) *do not* collect college catalogues and that over 4000 schools *do not* provide for meetings with parents to discuss college. Recognizing the potential deceptions of this kind of logic, we nevertheless are concerned about the existence of even a small number of schools completely lacking a college counseling effort.

Figure 2. Percentages of Schools Reporting College Counseling Practices



Indicative of the need for this study, it is useful to note how few schools seek formal evaluation of their college counseling program by students or by parents. In addition, our visits to schools revealed that evaluations by principals tend to be unsystematic, draw extensively from random commentary from parents and students, and focus on management aspects of the program. It appears that evaluation is an area that needs more attention.

Counselor Time and Duties

We found that 58% of the sampled high schools have one or less than one full-time person with college counseling responsibilities. However, there was a clear correlation between the number of college counselors and the size of the school (r = .7407). For example, most of the schools (91%) with fewer than 100 seniors employ one or less than one counselor, while most of the schools (76%) with more than 400 seniors employ four or more college counselors. These findings, combined with the finding that there was little relationship between the family income profile of the school and the number of college counselors, suggests that school size, rather than the family income profile of the school, is the primary determinant of how many college counselors are employed.

We also looked at the amount of time that the guidance staff of each school spends on college counseling as a proportion of all of their activities, including (1) personal and vocational counseling, (2) college counseling and (3) other non-counseling activities. Thirteen percent of the schools reported that their staff spends more than half of their time on college counseling duties. Half of the schools reported that their guidance staff spends less than a quarter of its time on college counseling. Suggesting that there are schools in this country outside the mainstream of "college consciousness," 11% of the schools reported that less than 10% of total counselor's time is spent on college counseling.

INFLUENCE OF FAMILY INCOME

Recognizing the importance of family economic status in the dynamics of American society and schooling, we asked college counselors to indicate the family income level of the majority of students in their school. For our purposes, *lower income* was defined as less than $15,000 total family income; *middle income*, from $15,000 to $35,000; and *upper income*, above $35,000. A quarter of the respondents reported that their schools enroll predominantly lower income students. Two-thirds of the schools were middle income, and less than 9% were predominantly upper income.

We were particularly interested in exploring our assumption that college attendance rates are influenced by family income factors. As expected, we found that the percentage of seniors going on to four-year colleges differs widely between lower income and higher income schools. The correlation between attendance at four-year colleges and family income level was high (r = .5118). Whereas most (81%) of the lower income schools send 30% or fewer seniors to four-year colleges, very few (2%) of the upper income schools have a college attendance rate this low. Looking from the opposite perspective, more than half (56%) of the upper income schools send more

than 80% of their seniors to four-year colleges, while less than 1% of lower income schools send this many students to four-year institutions. Table 2 summarizes these data. There is clear evidence that the economic status of one's parents is a powerful determinant of whether one pursues higher education and achieves the success thought to flow from college attendance.

Table 2. Patterns of College Attendance by Income Level

	Percent of Schools Which Send	
	30% or Fewer Graduates to 4-Year Colleges	80% or More Graduates to 4-Year Colleges
Lower Income Schools (24.7% of U.S. Schools)	81.2%	0.4%
Middle Income Schools (66.6% of U.S. Schools)	45.3	6.1
Upper Income Schools (8.5% of U.S. Schools)	2.2	56.0
All Schools	40.4	9.0

Ethnicity and Family Income

Our survey showed that most schools that are predominantly non-white (at least 50% non-white in student composition) enroll mostly lower income students. Almost two-thirds (62%) of the non-white schools (44 out of 71 schools) draw students from lower income families (see Table 3). Only one-third (34%) of the non-white schools draw students mainly from middle income families and 4% from upper income families.

Table 3. Ethnicity and Family Income

	Percent of Schools		
	Lower Income	Middle Income	Upper Income
Predominantly Non-White Schools (6.7% of U.S. schools)	62.0%	33.8%	4.2%
Predominantly White Schools (75.8% of U.S. schools)	19.6	70.5	9.9
All Schools	24.7	66.7	8.5

Among schools that are predominantly white (more than three-quarters white), 20% are lower income, 70% are middle income, and 10% are upper income in composition. Although many schools enroll students that are white and poor, it is evident that minorities, especially blacks and Hispanics, are much more likely than whites to attend high schools that enroll students from lower income families.

These data reinforce what other researchers have reported about the link between race and poverty in this country. How do these patterns, especially family income factors, affect the quality of college counseling received by students? We found that there are consistent differences among schools drawing students from different family income levels.

One important issue concerns the direct access of students to information about college, with special reference to college fairs, technological avenues (e.g., computers, video), trips to colleges, and visits by college representatives to the school. Table 4 shows that lower income schools are less likely than middle and upper income schools to offer access to college information, with the differences most marked in the use of video and computers. It is not surprising that the more affluent schools have been able to move more quickly to introduce these new technologies.

Table 4. College Counseling Practices as a Function of Income Level

	Percent of Schools Where Practice Occurs	
	Lower Income Schools	Upper Income Schools
College catalog library	98.1%	98.9%
College representatives	94.6	97.8
Financial aid information	91.6	83.5
Individual meetings with parents	76.2	85.7
Local College Fair or college night	75.1	81.3
College trips	81.2	64.8
Group meetings with parents	63.2	86.8
Local school profile	38.3	78.0
Computerized college information	36.0	52.7
Student evaluations of program	31.4	45.1
National College Fair (NACAC)	23.0	28.9
College videotaped information	15.7	27.5
Parent evaluations of program	13.4	24.2

College Representatives

Half the high schools reported that in the previous year colleges sent 25 or fewer representatives to visit with their students, with 2% reporting no visits. About a fifth of the schools reported 50 or more visits, and 5% of the schools reported over one hundred visits. The number of visits was correlated most closely with school size. However, looking again to anomalies in our data, we found one school with over 400 seniors that had *no* visits from college representatives. We also found several schools with fewer than 100 seniors that received more than 100 visits from colleges (and not all of these were private). This kind of disparity among schools leads one to look carefully at the influence of economic factors.

Lower income schools particularly do not fare well in the number of visiting college representatives (see Table 5). Whereas half (53%) of the upper income schools receive more than 50 college representatives a year, less than 6% of the lower income schools and a fifth (19%) of the middle income schools receive this many visits. At the opposite end of the scale, two-thirds (68%) of the lower income schools and half (50%) of the middle income schools receive 25 or fewer college visits a year (compared to 20% for upper income schools). Indications are strong that most colleges, particularly those that recruit actively, tend to ignore those high schools that have not historically sent many students to college. The hint that this disparity may be a result of the colleges' behavior is that more lower income schools (81%) take students to see colleges than do upper income schools (65%). Confronted by limited financial resources in the school and among parents (most lower income parents cannot afford to take their children to visit colleges), counselors in lower income schools, we concluded, are indeed trying to make headway. Our visits to schools (see Sections IV and V) revealed obstacles to increasing the exposure of lower income students to college options and, fortunately, also revealed many successful strategies available to the resourceful college counselor.

Table 5. College Representative Visits for Different Income Levels

Number of Visits per Year	Percent of Schools			
	All Schools	Lower Income	Middle Income	Upper Income
None	2.3%	4.6%	1.4%	2.2%
1-25	49.7	63.6	48.6	17.6
26-50	29.4	26.1	30.9	27.5
51-100	13.6	5.0	14.7	30.8
100+	5.0	0.8	4.4	22.0

Counseling Resources

With financial retrenchment occurring in many schools in recent years, we were interested in finding out whether the financial pinch was more severe among schools enrolling lower income students. As Table 6 demonstrates, for the 1981-1984 period, resources for college counseling were decreased in a fifth of the lower (21%) and middle (19%) income schools and only 8% of the upper income schools. Indeed, we see that many upper income schools actually prospered during this span of time, with 42% of the these schools showing an increase of resources.

Table 6. Change in Direct Support of College Counseling as a Function of Family Income Level of Schools

	Percent of Schools			
	All Schools	Lower Income	Middle Income	Upper Income
Increased Resources	19.1%	15.3%	17.7%	41.6%
Same Resources	62.7	64.1	63.7	50.6
Decreased Resources	18.2	20.6	18.6	7.9

Finally, we looked at the amount of time that the guidance staff of schools of different family income profiles spends on college counseling, as a proportion of all of their activities. Table 7 shows that 40% of the guidance counselors of upper income schools spend more than half their time on college counseling, whereas less than 6% of the counselors in lower income schools and 12% in middle income schools spend this much time on college counseling. The disparities are equally evident at the other end of the scale.

Table 7. Time Allocated to College Counseling as a Function of Family Income Level of School

Percentage of Counselor Time Spent on College Counseling	Percent of Schools		
	Lower Income	Middle Income	Upper Income
0-10%	15.3%	10.1%	2.2%
11-25%	49.8	39.3	18.9
26-50%	29.1	38.6	38.9
51-75%	3.8	9.5	25.6
76-100%	1.9	2.6	14.4

SUMMARY

The National College Counseling Survey confirmed what many have suspected about the variation across the country in school settings, in college attendance rates and in college counseling practices.

- While thousands of students attend high schools in cities and suburbs that are large in size (2000 or more students), a majority of schools in the country enroll fewer than 500 students. As expected, school size greatly influences the availability of resources devoted to college counseling, especially the number of counselors with college counseling duties.

- In most schools in the country, the majority of students do not go on directly to a four-year college. The patterns of college attendance, however, are affected radically by the family income profile of the school. Many fewer students from lower income schools attend a four-year institution than do students from upper income schools.

- Recognizing the discrepancy in family income and college attendance rates across the country, it is apparent that the two-year institution may represent an important alternative—a trial step—for many students not yet ready, academically or culturally, for the four-year college experience.

- Almost every school has in place much of the basic structure of a college counseling program. There are significant variations, however, on each dimension, especially in the number of visits from colleges, and the amount of guidance staff time spent on college counseling.

- The variations in college counseling resources and activities relate directly to the family income profile of the school. High schools drawing students from more well-to-do families offer more exposure to college through programs such as fairs, visits from college representatives, parent meetings, and the new information technologies. Counselors at upper income schools spend more time on college counseling duties.

Problems Identified

These findings do not address *per se* the question of quality of college counseling; they set the stage for a discussion of it. The upper income school, though favored by more abundant resources, does not necessarily offer college counseling that enhances student horizons or assures a good fit between a student and a college. Indeed, counselors from all types of schools, regardless of family income profile, used the open-ended portion of the survey to identify problems and challenges faced by their guidance program. The most frequently mentioned problem (by 16% of the respondents) was the lack of sufficient time to get to know students, to engage in creative planning with students, and to carry out effective college counseling. Other identified problems included (1) the need to help expand student horizons (to consider more college options, to think more independently, to reach higher, etc.); (2) insufficient financial resources, resulting in small staffs, student/counselor ratios that are too high, and small operating budgets; (3) student apathy and indifference toward taking responsibility, meeting deadlines, etc.; (4) the counselors' difficulty in keeping up to date with financial aid developments, college admissions requirements, career information, etc.; and (5) too many responsibilities for counselors, including

many non-counseling duties, such as managing student discipline and doing clerical work. The commentary from counselors indicates that, despite the variation in college counseling resources and "college consciousness" across the country, there are many problems and challenges that reach into every type of school, even the upper income schools.

Quality of College Counseling

While the quality of college counseling is an issue of importance for all schools, one cannot ignore the central finding of our National Survey: Students who need effective college counseling the most—those who are from low income families and attend public schools where a small percentage of classmates go on to college—are helped the least. Lower income schools have fewer services, less counselor time dedicated to college counseling, and less exposure to the world of higher education. That this situation reflects long recognized realities in our society does not make it any less alarming.

We know also that in rectifying the disparities in the allocation of college counseling resources, broader issues of equity and school improvement must be addressed. The enhancement of educational equity and quality is a challenge on a broad front in our society. Yet, as our report demonstrates in the following sections, improved college counseling and school improvement can go forward together. Furthermore, what we found in our thirteen school visits gives us reason to feel cautious optimism about the possibility of making progress in schools that lack the advantages of those with upper income status.

NATIONAL COLLEGE COUNSELING SURVEY

Background Information on Your School

School's County _____ State _____

1. How many students attend your high school?
   - ☐ 1. up to 200 students
   - ☐ 2. 201-500
   - ☐ 3. 501-1000
   - ☐ 4. 1001-1500
   - ☐ 5. 1501 or more

2. How many students are in your senior class?
   - ☐ 1. up to 100
   - ☐ 2. 101-250
   - ☐ 3. 251-400
   - ☐ 4. 401-600
   - ☐ 5. 600 or more

3. In the year following graduation, approximately what percentage of your students go on to *2-year* colleges? (Please give best estimate based on yearly average over past 3 years.)
   - ☐ 1. up to 10%
   - ☐ 2. 11% to 30%
   - ☐ 3. 31% to 50%
   - ☐ 4. 51% to 80%
   - ☐ 5. 81% or more

4. In the year following graduation, approximately what percentage of your students go on to *4-year* colleges? (Please give best estimate based on yearly average over past 3 years.)
   - ☐ 1. up to 10%
   - ☐ 2. 11% to 30%
   - ☐ 3. 31% to 50%
   - ☐ 4. 51% to 80%
   - ☐ 5. 81% or more

5. How would you characterize the economic status of the *majority* of students attending your school? Their families are predominantly:
   - ☐ 1. lower income (family income less than $15,000)
   - ☐ 2. middle income (family income between $15,000 and $35,000)
   - ☐ 3. upper income (family income more than $35,000)

What is the ethnic breakdown of your student population? (Estimate the percentage for each ethnic group.)

	0-5%	6-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%
6. White	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. Black	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. Asian	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. Hispanic (black)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. Hispanic (white)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. Native American	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. Other	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Information on College Counseling

13. How many guidance counselors with college guidance responsibilities are on the staff of your school?
   - ☐ 1. 0-1
   - ☐ 2. 2-3
   - ☐ 3. 4-5
   - ☐ 4. 6-7
   - ☐ 5. 8 or more

Looking at how the time of all guidance counselors at your school is allocated, what average percentage of the time is devoted to the following functions:

	0-10%	11-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%
14. Personal and vocational counseling.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15. College counseling.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
16. Non-counseling functions (e.g. teaching, scheduling, coaching)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

17. Over the past three years, has your school's direct support (budgeting, staffing, etc.) of college counseling increased, decreased or remained the same?
   ☐ 1. increased resources ☐ 2. decreased resources ☐ 3. same resources

How would you describe the impact of each of the following groups at your school in providing guidance to students interested in colleges?

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not at all Important	Negative Impact
18. Parents.	☐	☐	☐	☐
19. School Organizations (e.g. PTA).	☐	☐	☐	☐
20. Counselors.	☐	☐	☐	☐
21. Students (Peer Group).	☐	☐	☐	☐
22. Alumni.	☐	☐	☐	☐
23. Teachers.	☐	☐	☐	☐

How would you rate the importance of each of the following functions among the activities of college counselors at your school?

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not at all Important
24. Teaching decision-making skills to students.	☐	☐	☐
25. Establishing a list of potential colleges.	☐	☐	☐
26. Teaching students to use available reference materials.	☐	☐	☐
27. Helping students make final college selection.	☐	☐	☐

The College Guidance Process

Please indicate whether your college counseling program this year (1983-1984) includes the following activities or resources.

	Yes	No
28. Local College Fair or college night for your students.	☐	☐
29. National College Fairs (NACAC) for your students.	☐	☐
30. Individual meetings with parents.	☐	☐
31. Group meeting for parents.	☐	☐
32. Reference library of college catalogues for student use.	☐	☐
33. Video tape file containing college information.	☐	☐
34. Computerized information system for use by students.	☐	☐
35. Printed "profile" information (on your school, students) available to college representatives.	☐	☐
36. Printed information on current status of college financial aid.	☐	☐
37. Trips to nearby colleges for your students.	☐	☐
38. Regular evaluations of your services by students.	☐	☐
39. Regular evaluations of your services by parents.	☐	☐
40. Visits to the school by college representatives.	☐	☐

41. How many colleges sent representatives to visit your school this year?
   - ☐ 1 None
   - ☐ 2 Between 1 and 25
   - ☐ 3 Between 26 and 50
   - ☐ 4 Between 51 and 100
   - ☐ 5 More than 100

Please indicate whether, over the past two years, your school has used the following for professional development and training *for your college counselors.*

	Yes	No
42. Workshop or presentation by persons affiliated with your school.	☐	☐
43. Professional conference attendance.	☐	☐
44. Outside consultant.	☐	☐
45. Professional journals.	☐	☐

46. Given the opportunity, would you like to engage in additional organized professional development activities?
   - ☐ 1. Very much so
   - ☐ 2. To a considerable extent
   - ☐ 3. To a moderate degree
   - ☐ 4. Not very much
   - ☐ 5. Not at all

47. To what extent do your college counselors have influence on your students' selection of colleges to which they *apply*?
   - ☐ 1. Great influence
   - ☐ 2. Considerable influence
   - ☐ 3. Moderate influence
   - ☐ 4. Minor influence
   - ☐ 5. No influence

48. To what extent do your college counselors have influence on your students' selection of colleges to which they *enroll*?
   - ☐ 1. Great influence
   - ☐ 2. Considerable influence
   - ☐ 3. Moderate influence
   - ☐ 4. Minor influence
   - ☐ 5. No influence

Summary

49. Overall, how would you rate the effectiveness of the college guidance program at your school?
   ☐ 1. Very effective ☐ 2. Somewhat effective ☐ 3. Not effective

50. Please list any innovations, exceptional programs or new ideas that have been particularly helpful in improving the college guidance process at your school over the last three years.
   a.
   b.

51. Please list the major challenges or problems faced by the college guidance program at your school today.
   a.
   b.

52. If sufficient resources were available (budget, staff, expertise), what specific steps would you take to improve the guidance process at your school?
   a.
   b.

53. What are the major problems you find in dealing with college admissions offices?
   a.
   b.

54. What changes should college admissions offices make to better serve you and your students?
   a.
   b.

Name of Respondent _____

IV

A Model Environment for Effective College Counseling

Many observers of secondary education have noted that the success of a school is dependent to a considerable degree on the internal and external environment of the school. This is no less true of the college counseling function in a school. Our National Survey indicated that many schools suffer from insufficient funding and student apathy. From the counselor's perspective, these factors present serious obstacles to developing outstanding college counseling programs. Conversely, in each of our investigations of thirteen *exemplary* college counseling efforts across the country, we found an environment conducive to success or, at worst, an environment without serious deterrents to success.

Essential Aspects of Environment

Our studies show that three aspects of the environment are consistently associated with effective college counseling. First, the degree to which the surrounding community is supportive of and linked to college decision-making is essential. How the community views the school and supports the value of going to college often determines the extent of community support. We found also that the degree to which the school and its counselors actively seek community ties is related to the amount of community support.

Second, the qualities that counselors, especially the head counselor, bring to their work are crucial in defining the context for college counseling. College counseling is a complex and perhaps unique professional challenge in the secondary school setting, especially with its requirement to build effective relationships both inside and outside of the school. The task requires a special set of personal characteristics. The leadership of the school, especially the principal, would be wise to take notice of these characteristics in building a staff.

Third, the principal and other school leaders shape the environment for college counseling. These people who define goals for the school play the most crucial role in influencing educational philosophy—allocating resources, and extending or withholding rewards. With the exception of one school among those we visited, the head counselor and the principal were in agreement on the importance of college counseling and on program goals. Furthermore, in those unfortunate circumstances when the actions of a college counselor incurred the ire of some person or constituency, the principal was ready to defend the counselor. Perhaps the most positive circumstance for a college counseling program occurs when the principal is an active force for school improvement and sees college aspirations and attendance as central to advancing the school's program. We will discuss below several examples of the fusion of school improvement efforts with the mission of the college counseling program.

We report in this section on three important aspects of the environment: ties to the local community, the qualities of the guidance staff, and the qualities and orientation of the principal. We recognize that, to an extent, each of these aspects is a "given" in any school context. We found, however, that schools with effective college counseling programs take very little for granted, *including* aspects of the environment. Rather, such schools and their leaders recognize the importance of community support, staffing, and school leadership and take conscious steps to shape these elements.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

An intriguing aspect of our investigation was the variation we saw in the role played by schools and their college counseling programs in different community settings. As noted earlier, community settings vary on several dimensions, including their rural/suburban/urban location and their family income profile. We also discovered considerable variation in community homogeneity and in community stability. Both of these factors have significant influence on the culture of the high school.

A prime example of a relatively homogeneous and stable community is an Ohio school located in an affluent suburb of handsome traditional houses along tree-lined, quiet streets. Limited migration from the city and an aging population have produced diminishing school enrollments and have resulted in a conservative school leadership. Creative ideas are often looked upon with suspicion. In contrast to this setting, a community in rapid and destabilizing transition exists on the outskirts of a Michigan city. This area has seen a nearly complete reversal of its racial composition over the last ten years as minorities have moved from the inner city and replaced a predominantly Jewish population. The community is in the throes of adjusting its social services (including its schools) to a population with significant social need. The conflicts and frustrations of this situation invade the high school, where keeping the peace is a primary concern.

The mission and priorities of the high school are necessarily dictated by the conditions and needs presented by the community. Likewise, these conditions and needs shape the meaning attached to school and college attendance. Thus, an analysis of college counseling must take into consideration these community factors. With this in mind, it is useful to identify two alternative models of a community-school relationship that exist among the schools we visited. Each model has produced a different definition and form of successful college counseling.

The School as Community Focal Point

Some of the most dynamic college counseling programs we visited exist in schools that have prominence at the center of local community life. What follows are four examples of such schools.

Example: An inner city California school with a 90% minority student population is a refuge of relative calm in a place of street gang activity and of transition from a white middle class area to a high poverty situation. The school is viewed by community leaders and the school staff as an "island of sanity and hope."

Example: A school located in an affluent western Michigan suburb sends 94% of its students to college and is viewed as an important symbol of community standards and success. Quality is a byword and the school serves as a crucial vehicle for the realization of community goals.

Example: A small rural Maine school is situated in a community experiencing severe economic decline and cultural change. It provides a valued and accepted avenue of mobility for its youth. A dynamic principal, now in his sixteenth year, has taken leadership (with key community leaders) in redefining the community's future.

Example: A lower income Texas high school enrolling Hispanic students is situated in a stable, close-knit community of rising Hispanic self-awareness and ambition. In an atmosphere of respect and concern for its students, the school is demonstrating for parents and the community that self-improvement is an achievable goal.

There are few common characteristics among these four schools. Two exist in communities of cultural homogeneity; two do not. Two are endowed with influential school principals who have brought major changes to their schools; two have principals more committed to maintenance and stability. Two of the schools have college counseling programs led by people with national reputations whose ideas and innovations have influenced other counselors across the country; two are led by counselors who are equally committed and skilled but lack the same flair and knack for public recognition. One sends a high percentage of graduating seniors to four-year colleges; three of the schools send more students to two-year colleges.

The common denominator among these schools is the importance that the surrounding community places on the school and on going to college. Community goals, school mission, and college counseling are overlapping and mutually supporting. In each case, the principal and the head counselor have recognized—indeed, built and reinforced—this trinity of mutual interest. In each case, college counseling is widely perceived to be at the center of efforts to advance the well-being of the community.

The School as Public Utility

The more prevalent pattern of community/school ties finds the school in a less central place on the community agenda.

Example: In a stable, affluent suburban city in Ohio, one gets the sense that (except for the parents of students) the school is taken for granted. For many years, one goal of the school and of the college counseling program has been clear: Get the seniors into respectable colleges. In the eyes of the community, the school and its college counseling program serve more as a maintenance system (maintenance of the college-going tradition) than as a vehicle for community change and improvement.

Example: Amid a growing, diverse community outside Philadelphia, a very large centralized school is struggling to stay attuned to the economic changes that have brought blue collar and white collar jobs to the community as well as upper and middle income housing. The work ethic and upward mobility are paramount in this community, and it has been generous in its support of school budgets. The school district has funded a Director of

Community Relations to assure continuing community/school ties. The school and its college counseling program are regarded highly for their services to both middle income and upper income students. One gets the sense, however, that most citizens of the community are sufficiently busy with their own work and personal lives that they think very little about the distant high school. The school is doing fine work, it is worthy of pride, it will be paid for ... but all this is assumed and expected. This school, like the one in Ohio, serves as an adjunct to community life, more in the role of a "public utility" than as an agent of change.

The differences between the school serving as a focal point for community purpose and the school serving as an adjunct to community life are obviously matters of degree. There are many common elements among the six schools described above, including the excellence of their college counseling programs. Furthermore, while attempting to meet different needs, each school recognizes the importance of the community/school tie and seeks actively to elicit community support and involvement. In turn, each school sees the college counseling function as a critical connection to the community, both in what the program does for the community and in what the community can do for the program.

Community Links

Our school visits suggest that enlightened college counselors recognize the potential power of the community in helping students to (1) heighten their awareness of career and college options and (2) expand their aspirations. A Michigan school in flux (described above) has developed an exceptional array of programs to meet the needs of its predominantly minority student population. In a situation where students bring manifold needs (most of which have little to do with college counseling), the dissemination of information about careers and college has become one superior part of the guidance department's effort. Four programs draw directly on the resources of the business community:

- *Project Involve*. Local businesses offer apprenticeship opportunities to students interested in furthering their understanding of a particular business or profession.

- *Cooperative Work Program*. Students who have developed a particular area of interest may leave school early to participate in afternoon work activities at local businesses. We talked to two students who were enthusiastic about their work in a nursery school and a veterinarian's office.

- *School-Business Partnership*. As a means of involving teachers in the enhancement of student awareness, teachers may immerse themselves in a local business for a brief period of time. For instance, English teachers have the opportunity to spend two days writing for a newspaper or drafting commercial messages for a marketing firm. The teachers are then more willing and more able to demonstrate the connection between work, school, and a student's future.

- *Academic Hotline*. A local cable television station has arranged to provide help to students having trouble with homework. Students may call and receive help from honor students and teachers. The program helps demonstrate to students the community's interest in academic success.

For a school struggling to raise the aspirations of its students, these community based programs are important initiatives. The counseling staff, teachers, school leadership, and local businesses have worked in concert to bring the programs into reality. The most creative and successful programs for allying the community with the purposes of the school occur in lower income neighborhoods. We are not certain whether these alliances arise from a greater sense of need, a special pride in community, the ambitious efforts of a few farsighted leaders, or some combination of factors. Whatever the explanation, we found college counseling programs serving the needs of lower income students, from California to Maine, each working in close concert with the community.

Counselors in Michigan and California convinced local banks to donate hand-held financial aid calculators, which have become an essential resource in helping parents analyze college costs. This small portable machine is programmed to simulate the format of the College Scholarship Service's Financial Aid Form. The California counselor observed that, "It's fourteen years that I've been doing this, and until I got this I always felt so insufficient in helping parents understand the costs of college." Recognizing the mutual involvement of banks, college counselors, and colleges in financial aid planning, bankers across the country may see the mutual advantages of this kind of gift. To assure the perception of mutual benefit, the resourceful counselor in Michigan went a step further by having her calculators encased in an attractive leather case with the bank's logo on the outside.

A former staff member of the rural school in Maine painted a picture for us of community/school relationships in this isolated community:

> The school provides one of the very few social opportunities available to the community. They attend athletic activities *en masse*. The Adult Education Program has a wide variety of leisure courses, and they are well attended. While I worked there, I took a course just for the opportunity to get out and meet other adults. I was amazed how well used the building was in the evening. Parents help chaperone trips and also help raise scholarship monies.

The school has opened its doors to the community and by this step, has involved the community in the school's mission, principally in broadening the community's vision of the future. Perhaps the most innovative program was a May 1985 conference designed "to let our young people know that we are all united behind them in helping them become whatever they want to be in life; to let them know that they can do more, be more; whether it's college that they seek or working in a mill, driving a skidder, running a farm or whatever." The conference grew out of weeks of planning that involved school staff, students, and members of the community. The school's principal has recognized that efforts to expand the vision of students must target parents as well as students.

A Virginia suburb of Washington, D.C., has a proud historical tradition and a core black community, with long-time residents mixing with newly arrived black and foreign-born families. The white population tends to include upper middle and upper class families, many of whom commute to Washington. Blacks are represented in disproportionate numbers among those students not aspiring to attend college. The school district has charged

a highly regarded assistant superintendent (the former principal of the school we visited) with developing programs to improve minority student achievement and meeting other special needs of the minority student population. The personnel of the city's public high school and key community leaders are deeply involved in this undertaking. Already, the school has in place several outreach programs, such as an Executive Internship Program and financial aid workshops for parents, and it is collaborating with the district and local community groups, including the Northern Virginia Urban League, to do more. It is apparent that school and community leaders have joined together to address the needs of minorities, especially as these needs pertain to aspirations for higher education. As such, the high school's college counseling program is a direct participant and beneficiary.

In sum, we found that schools and communities with a high proportion of lower income families draw on community resources in very creative ways. In each of our examples, school leaders and college counselors have taken initiatives to create these programs.

THE COUNSELOR

Not surprisingly, we found that the personal qualities of the counseling staff are a crucial element in an effective college counseling program and, for that matter, in carrying out any of the duties of a guidance office. There are, however, some serious questions about the readiness of counselors to perform at a high level of effectiveness. First, the inquiries of the Commission on Precollege Guidance and Counseling revealed that only about 60% of the graduate counselor preparation programs in this country provide certificates or graduate degree programs in *school* counseling. The Commission pointed to many gaps in the preparation of school counselors, including the lack of specific preparation for assisting students in their transition from high school to college. Counselors reported to us that knowledge of the college admissions process and of the college decision process arises almost completely from on-the-job responsibilities and experience. The haphazard preparation of many school counselors, especially for their college counseling duties, is an area of serious concern. Second, in light of the way counselors are prepared for their duties, it is clear that counselors need to be specially motivated to make serious professional progress in the college counseling area. Counselors related to us that many of their colleagues did not arrive with (nor develop later) any special expertise in this area. They noted also that, for financial reasons, professional development programs of regional and nations organizations are not always feasible avenues of professional development.

The Satisfaction of College Counseling

While deficiencies in training and interest demand our attention, the major issue concerns the counselor's perception of professional challenge and satisfaction derived from doing college counseling. Among the thirteen exemplary college counseling programs that we visited, every head counselor reported and demonstrated excitement and motivation. For these individuals, the tasks associated with college counseling are motivating, challenging, and rewarding. As an example of a professional challenge that attracts

them to college counseling, many counselors emphasized the intriguing inside/outside aspects of the job, with efforts devoted to building bridges to students and teachers on the inside and to parents, colleges, and community agencies on the outside.

However, the attraction of college counseling is not immediately evident to many counselors, especially individuals already busy with an array of other duties that are often of a crisis nature. We suspect that many counselors see that college counseling may conflict with their own primary goal, which is to help guide students through the challenges and pitfalls of adolescence. College counseling is seen by some as a bit esoteric—even a bit elitist.

From the perspective of the counselors we interviewed, this kind of thinking is too limited in scope. While not rejecting the importance of traditional guidance duties, each counselor expressed a philosophical perspective that emphasizes the centrality of preparing students to make sound decisions as they experience many forms of transition, including that from high school to college. In this light, college counseling is only one arena, though a crucial one, of student decision-making. The message from these counselors is that a commitment to facilitating good student decision-making leads naturally to a serious commitment to college counseling.

We are not now prepared to make definitive proposals about improving the preparation of counselors or enhancing their motivation to be effective college counselors. Perhaps, as these exemplary counselors suggested, the question is mainly a philosophical one. We are prepared, however, to identify some of the characteristics and skills of counselors that appear to be associated with effective college counseling. This approach, we hope, will provide essential information for school leaders and counselors in the first stages of an effort to improve their college counseling program.

The Effective College Counselor

As we visited schools across the country and talked to counselors and other groups, we were surprised at the similarities in what people said about the staffs of their college counseling programs. Most of their commentary concerned the head counselor of these exemplary programs, but in programs with more than a single staff member the comments usually applied to the remaining staff members of the counseling office as well. Five characteristics arose again and again as we sought to find what can be identified as special about the outstanding college counselor.

Student Advocate. That "teachers must like their students" remains at the heart of the educational and counseling process. Everything we saw and heard suggested that these counselors genuinely enjoy being with students and are willing to expend an unusual amount of effort on their behalf. Outstanding counselors display this commitment to students in three ways. First, they create an office atmosphere that is informal and invites students to drop by. Important steps at a school in Virginia were to put glass in the outside door and to create a lounge area in order to help break down barriers. In addition, most counselors make an effort to know as many students as possible on a first-name basis. One result of these efforts has been, as a student in Michigan expressed it, "Everyone comes to the Guidance Office." Indeed, many students are not shy about admitting that they are "Guidance Department junkies."

Second, outstanding counselors recognize the power of the self-fulfilling prophecy. They consistently emphasize that their students have the potential to better themselves and to meet ambitious goals. Indeed, students report that this theme is expressed frequently in the form of mottoes: "You're a lot better than you think you are;" "Your years here will be well spent;" "If you don't expect more, you don't get more;" "Ya Ga Ta Wa Na" ["You've got to want to"]. We saw the message of success reinforced by award assemblies, news coverage, bulletin board displays, and many other stategies.

Third, outstanding counselors are inventive and resourceful on behalf of student interests, even to the point of being overzealous. A counselor in California said, "If it's good for kids, and it's legal, and we can afford it, we'll do it." In the acquisition of resources, the counselors are especially creative. A quiet-spoken counselor in Texas, who admits that she "wouldn't mind asking the devil for his tail," has coaxed microcomputers and scholarship money from local businessmen. Against the wishes of his principal, a counselor in West Virginia has gone publicly to the school board to seek support for programs, the most recent episode concerning the need for a summer school course for students who had flunked a science course needed for college admission.

Students recognize these counselor as allies prepared to work energetically on their behalf. Without sacrificing the demand for discipline and the "nagging" necessary to get some students to meet deadlines, the counselors have infused their work with an attitude of caring and support. Overwhelmingly, their students respond positively and enthusiastically.

Effective Manager. Effective college counselors, especially the head counselor, have a keen sense of the organizational systems that shape the school curriculum and the college admissions process. At the most rudimentary level, the calendar of deadlines (for tests, applications, recommendations, interviews, budgets) is in clear focus. Also, the counselor must have an accurate mental map of who makes what decisions affecting the college decision process. Command of these aspects requires homework and the inclination and ability to exploit the information.

While obvious to most people knowledgeable about a guidance office, effective management of information is an important part of college counseling. Course enrollments, student records, college application information, letters of recommendation, test scores, and other test score results, and historical data on college admissions for the school are integral to the program. Most programs still rely on the exceptional dedication of one or two individuals to collect, maintain, and exploit this information bank. We found that modern computerized data management techniques have not entered the college counseling world. We do not know whether these programs are succeeding because of, or despite, the lack of modern technology, but we can report that each program handled information in a reliable and effective manner. Furthermore, this task is never far from the mind of the counselor, who must answer for the program when mistakes occur.

Strong Work Ethic. Our visits indicated that effective counselors do not work a "conventional" work day, either in terms of time on the job or the energy they bring to the task. They come to work early and stay late.

Effective counselors "get a lot done." Students and parents told us frequently that the head counselor was "always trying to improve." In general, it appears that the common attribute driving each of these counselors is a strong desire to build an excellent program and to attain recognition for this accomplishment. While we recognize that this level of commitment may be unusual in any organization, it may nevertheless be a prerequisite for excellence. The job is complex, relates to several different constituencies, and requires creativity. It is a difficult challenge and requires exceptional time and dedication.

Political Savvy. With few exceptions, effective head college counselors are adept at working with a wide variety of constituencies, including students, parents, teachers, school administrators, board members, business people, local government, college admissions staff, and college counselors at other schools. In particular, the head counselor must be sufficiently persuasive to build networks of support for programs, budgets, and new ideas. At the same time, the counselor must be skillful at avoiding the political minefields that lie outside the door, whether it is influential parents who insist that their child go to an Ivy League school or parents who fear that the program serves only already committed college-preparatory students. In short, the effective college counselor must bring, or develop soon thereafter, a strong dose of political savvy.

Effective Leader. We have discussed both the management and political requirements of the college counseling task. Because of the need for productive relationships with people, we expected that effective functioning in this environment would require qualities of leadership. We found in every school a head counselor who was an effective leader. The presence of a leader, however, was not always immediately evident. Because leaders come in sometimes unexpected shapes, garb, and personalities, on more than one visit it took some time before we recognized a leader and then were able to define the counselor's qualities of leadership.

Another reason why we did not immediately recognize leaders is that leadership is not necessarily synonomous with charisma. Many of the group are quiet-spoken and somewhat self-effacing. A noteworthy exception to this pattern is a woman who has held national leadership positions in her professional organization (NACAC) and brings a remarkable flair and dynamism to her work. Her effectiveness, dedication, and local fame are such that one administrator said, "Her legacy will live long after her." What is common among this disparate group of college counselors is a commitment to serving students, superb competence at an array of management tasks, and a drive—almost a compulsion—to build an outstanding college counseling program. It is this last quality, the desire for excellence, that is the most striking aspect of their leadership style. It pervades their relationships with others and the priorities they set. As outsiders, we can testify that this passion is wonderfully infectious.

In this section, we have addressed the qualities of college counselors, particularly head counselors, that are components of effective college counseling. We believe that schools should look for, or develop, counselors who are resourceful allies of students, understand and use efficient organizational and management systems, exhibit a strong work ethic, have political

savvy, and have leadership qualities. While this list may have a utopian echo to it, we believe that many school professionals already exhibit or are capable of developing these qualities. We note, however, that the most significant quality—the quality that more than anything else sets the environment for effective college counseling—is the passion for excellence. We are less sure about the sources of this attribute.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT AND THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

Recent literature on schools has demonstrated that the principal (or headmaster) plays the single most important role in achieving school effectiveness, especially in a situation in which significant school improvement is necessary. In this respect, Sarah Lightfoot discussed the importance of leadership alliances between the principal and key school staff. Likewise, our examination of thirteen schools with exemplary college counseling programs revealed, in every case except one, a singularity of purpose between the principal and the head college counselor. The priority placed on college attendance, program goals, and usually, methods were matters of firm agreement. Furthermore, principals and counselors alike recognize that support from the top is important to an effective college counseling effort. This support takes many forms, including:

- Adequate budgets;
- Thoughtful influence over selection of the head counselor and other staff;
- Regular communication with the counseling staff about priorities and student programs;
- Curricular leadership that sustains college counseling goals;
- Demonstration of support for the program with teachers, parents, and students;
- Recognition and support of counselors, including opportunities for professional development; and
- Visibility and participation on behalf of college counseling programs.

We observed three different administrative postures toward college counseling among our thirteen schools. First, there is the principal, often in a large school in a stable suburban setting, who recognizes that college counseling is important to school success but has limited interest in the program. This effective, somewhat conservative professional provides adequate support but no special commitment. Second, there is the principal—rare in our study but perhaps not so rare among all schools—who is uncomfortable with alliance-building and aggressive program development in the school, especially in the counseling department. This defensive, rule-minded worrier is often engaged in low-level conflict with the more forward-looking head college counselor. Finally, there is the principal who is leading a program of school improvement and change and sees college counseling as an integral

part of this effort. In almost every case, the most dynamic and charismatic principals are found among this latter group.

Integration with School Goals

We found that support from the top almost always coexists with exemplary college counseling and, where exceptional school leadership and support exist, one may find a truly remarkable integration of initiatives in both college counseling and school improvement. Among our thirteen schools, there are several intriguing examples of this phenomenon.

Example: In the face of public criticism and competition from a local superintendency, an independent day school in Florida found itself struggling to maintain its reputation and the quality and numbers of its applicant pool. About four years ago the headmaster and his key staff decided to define the school's niche in new terms: "We will provide a service to the seventy-fifth percentile kid. We will show that we are not elitist. We will teach our students to make good decisions so they are ready to leave as seniors." The programmatic expression of this goal became a comprehensive guidance system that begins in the seventh grade and stresses study skills, decision-making, values clarification, and career and college orientation. During the middle of the junior year, the formal college counseling stage begins. Four years later, with the guidance department playing a crucial role in the school's program, the school's reputation in the community is solid and the school is thriving.

Example: Similar to most of the principals we met, a principal at a high school in a California city of 60,000 has a keen understanding of community dynamics. He notes that more than half his students come from broken homes, and "Nobody wants these kids." Among the mostly upper middle class parents of his students, the principal finds a lack of parent-child contact and a strong push to attend college. He asks, "With the system putting a heck of a lot of pressure on these kids, how are they going to make decisions?" The response of the principal has been to make the school a locus of "sanity, friendship, love, and caring." Despite innumerable obstacles (greatly reduced school budgets, a lack of enthusiasm for the task among some teachers) the school, with the guidance department at the forefront, has made gradual progress in this direction.

Committed Personnel

In our visits, the counselors in schools enrolling the highest proportion of lower income students exhibited the strongest leadership. This coincidence appears to support the dictum that necessity (low socioeconomic status and immediate crisis) is, or may be, the mother of invention (creative, dynamic leadership). In California, Texas, West Virginia, and Maine, we observed principals who have dramatically improved their schools and, in so doing, used college counseling as a crucial agent of change.

Example: A few years ago, this inner city minority school in California was mired in chaos and conflict. A principal came on the scene who set out to restore community pride and a sense of safety. More than once the principal walked into the middle of a street gang war and, on the basis of his personal reputation and strength of personality, convinced the participants to disband. He exerted strong discipline and did not tolerate student disruption of the school. The core of his strategy for school improvement, however, was the effort to strengthen the academic program and raise student aspirations toward a better future. He sought out, according to one staff member we

met, "powerful people who know where the rubber meets the road." As translated for us, this phrase means seeking committed people who are able to cope successfully with the tough realities of the school. One such person is a new head college counselor, who was hired in 1971 and was provided full support, including new resources, to upgrade college counseling. The combination of a dynamic principal and a skilled, tenacious, caring college counselor raised the college attendance rate from 15% in 1971 to 78% in 1980. The atmosphere of the school and the sense of hope among its students are now profoundly improved over the situation that prevailed in the late 1960's. A new principal is on duty now, but the dynamic program continues under the inspired leadership of the college counselor.

Leadership Themes

Principals in Texas, West Virginia, and Maine placed college counseling at the forefront of their programs of school improvement but proceeded with quite different emphases. The phrase, "If it works—copy it!" captures well the pragmatic, low key style of the Texas principal. He worked closely with his hand-picked head counselor to adopt and improve upon the best college counseling approaches available in neighboring high schools. Today this once lackluster school is a source of considerable pride for parents and the community at large. In a community of low income families and little prior contact with higher education, 70% of the school's seniors go on to a two- or four-year institution.

The terse statement, "We won!" exemplifies the sometimes belicose and always competitive instincts of the West Virginia principal. In close, not always easy alliance with his activist college counselor, the principal has moved his low status school onto the same academic field with the local competition. College attendance is up to 48% (from 25%) and, to the pride of the entire school, four graduates of the school received prestigious academic honors from the state university.

When the principal at the Maine school says, "Kids have to feel good," he is expressing a premise that has shaped his work over a sixteen year period. In an isolated rural school where every student qualifies for the federal hot lunch program, the principal has sold the ideas of self-worth and confidence in the future to students and parents. By a canny application of psychological and managerial principles, spiced with a strong dose of Yankee common sense, he has created an environment that is caring, happy, and a source of community pride. He has worked closely with his college counselor to bring the college attendance rate of the school's seniors up to 84%.

The leadership of these school principals has produced significant school improvement in environments presenting many obstacles. In each case, the college counseling function has been an integral part of a commitment to progress. In less dramatic situations, too, we find that the principal is a crucial factor in the success of the college counseling effort. At best, the principal is an active force for outstanding college counseling; at worst, the principal must "permit" the college counseling program to move ahead on its own. In either case, it is clear that the destiny of college counseling is closely linked to the attitudes and inclinations of the principal. It is a relationship that deserves continuing attention.

The fundamental proposition of this section of our report is that college counseling is influenced by aspects of the school environment, including ties to the local community, the qualities that counselors bring to college counseling, and the role played by the school principal. We found, however, that influence may originate from any of these sources, and in the hands of an inspired principal or college counselor, these aspects may be merged with the goals of college counseling.

In this light, crucial questions pertain to purpose. What are the needs of the community? What are the goals of the school? How do aspirations for higher education fit into this scheme? Although the desires of the community and the aims and skills of the counselors are crucial, we believe that, realistically, it is the principal who is best situated to bring consensus and action on these questions. As such, it is the principal who is most likely to determine the destiny of a school's college counseling program. This fact is not necessarily disturbing, but it should elicit attention, especially if ambitions run in the direction of creating a truly exemplary college counseling program. In the final analysis, college counseling needs the principal and, usually, the principal needs college counseling.

V

Practices that Enhance the College Counseling Process

While it is crucial to establish an environment conducive to effective college counseling, a school must recognize also that issues of implementation are of equivalent importance. Important questions include: What is actually happening in the counseling office? What activities and approaches are associated with exemplary college counseling? As we visited schools, we found that each of the programs excelled in four areas:

- A college guidance curriculum starting as early as grades seven and eight.
- Support networks and participation by students, teachers, and parents.
- Financial aid initiatives and innovations.
- Productive relationships with colleges and universities.

We believe that a college counseling staff aspiring to excellence *must* pay attention to these four areas. As such, each is a category of professional practice that is likely to separate the excellent college counseling program from the mediocre. Our aim in this section is to convey what exemplary programs are doing in these areas. There is much for schools to learn from each other, and our report is designed to be a means to that end.

A COLLEGE GUIDANCE CURRICULUM

Over and over, we heard counselors say, "Have a plan and start it early." Indeed, in the majority of the schools that we visited, we found an explicit sequence of activities designed to carry students through several years of high school experience. Such a sequence—in effect, a curriculum—recognizes the developmental nature of schooling and the phases of decision and change that unfold through the senior year and beyond. The goals of the curriculum should include the enhancement of student self-esteem, the broadening of horizons and aspirations, and preparation to make sound decisions—especially decisions about college.

The guidance curriculum is connected to the formal academic curriculum in important ways and, at the same time, operates on several parallel dimensions. Usually, the head college counselor leads the effort and is responsible for the implementation of activities that are a part of the sequence. It is evident from our investigation that successful programs of this kind start early and reach across institutional boundaries, at least back to the junior

high school level. From this perspective, it may be that the counselor (perhaps the principal also) is the only school professional expressly charged to pay attention to student learning over so many years. It is an important and challenging undertaking.

Two schools, an affluent school in Florida and a low-income school in California, have developed comprehensive and explicit guidance curricula. We will describe briefly each program and identify elements of programs from other schools.

Curriculum Prototype—Florida

In the previous section, we described a private Florida school enrolling 750 students that set out to compete more effectively for students. The programmatic response was to develop a special curriculum to help students succeed academically and learn to make effective decisions. This is the year-by-year sequence of activities that is now in place:

- *Seventh Grade:* Students meet in small groups and individually with an assigned advisor. The advisor is a regular faculty member with a teaching load reduced from five to three classes. The emphasis is on the development of **effective study skills** such as taking notes, keeping track of assignments, managing a notebook, and learning to memorize essential information.

- *Eighth Grade:* Again, students meet regularly with a class advisor. The focus this year, however, is on the **clarification of values.** An assumption of the activities is that students must begin to see shades of meaning and contemplate decisions that lie between unrealistic extremes.

- *Ninth Grade:* The focus in the ninth grade is on **study skills** again but at a higher level of sophistication. An experienced faculty member/counselor pays special attention to helping students organize study time and develop procedures for improved memory and for filing and retrieving information. Students hear again about important, though elementary, aspects such as bringing notebooks to class and keeping them up to date.

- *Tenth Grade:* The veteran class advisor of the tenth grade emphasizes the connecting of the student world to the larger environment, including the arena of careers and college. The students participate in a **writing and speaking** unit. In the fall, English courses require students to write a series of papers (and a resumé) describing their life experiences. In the spring, students speak to each other in ever larger groups and begin to focus on skills that will make for effective interviews.

- *Eleventh Grade:* The first half of the junior year features extensive **exposure to testing**, including the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory and a Word and Number Inventory Test. The advisor for this grade recognizes a "utilitarian trap" in the program: college is the next important juncture, and students realize that testing will help them identify appropriate schools and exclude others. At the middle of the year, transition to the formal college counseling program occurs. Students are assigned to one of the three college counselors, with **Junior Day** marking this important refocusing of effort. Classes are suspended on Junior Day, and students are presented extensive information about the college admissions process by means of presentations, a superb packet of documents, and

films. Students complete planning questionnaires, meet in small groups to discuss criteria for decision-making, and debate the strengths and weaknesses of the "college admissions game." Later in the junior year, students are offered opportunities to visit colleges, including a spring trip to nineteen schools in the southeastern United States.

- *Twelfth Grade*: The senior year entails more school visits, extensive discussions with the college counselor, and implementation of the mechanics of the **application process**.

By the college counseling stage of this sequence, the student is comfortable with seeing an advisor and with exploring personal issues. Furthermore, the experience of the previous years makes it possible to structure a good match between a student and a college counselor. Recognizing the advantages available to this school (students and families committed to college attendance, the human resources to keep the counselor/student ratio at about 1 to 100), we nevertheless believe that the concept and activities of this program are of potential interest to many other schools.

Curriculum Prototype—California

At the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, was an inner city school in California. This school, described in the previous section, enrolls 2000 mainly lower income students in the upper three grades. Over the last fifteen years, the head college counselor has developed a sequence of activities designed to open up the possibility of going to college for students not otherwise on the path to higher education. The program begins in ninth grade.

- *Ninth Grade:* The goal for this age level is to educate students, parents and junior high counselors about college options and procedures, with particular reference to the special opportunities available in California. The wide selection of public and private institutions in the state presents some unique problems of information or (opportunity) overload. The high school's head college counselor presents **evening workshops** for students and parents at the junior high schools. Because of the cultural diversity of the city, the presentations are translated into several languages. Workshops address college admissions requirements, course scheduling requirements, summer school options, and financial aid opportunities for families at every income level. In addition to the workshops, the high school's counselors visit the feeder schools to help students plan their tenth grade academic program.

- *Tenth Grade:* Every tenth grader is required to take a **ten week guidance course**. The college counselor, who is a regular speaker, reinforces the information covered in the workshops of the previous year. Course planning through the end of the senior year and financial aid analysis are areas of special emphasis. The school's many foreign language speaking students are encouraged to take language proficiency examinations. All tenth graders are encouraged to take (and prepare for) the PSAT with the eleventh graders the following October. Test-taking and "test finesse" are promoted.

- *Eleventh Grade:* Annually, about 200 eleventh graders take the PSAT and this test is viewed as a crucial experience in the grooming process for college admissions. The college counselor **visits each eleventh grade**

history class in early fall to explain the experience and benefits of the test. Extensive academic information is collected on each of the test-takers and **individual conferences** are held to review test results and discuss realistic college options. The college counselor visits the history classes again in April to distribute applications for the June SAT or ACT examination. The college counselor seeks fee waivers for low income students taking standardized tests.

Twelfth Grade: The senior year focuses on all the functions that must be performed if a student is to attend college and have sufficient financial aid. On the first day of school, each student receives the first of thirteen issues of a **college newsletter**. The newsletter has the student's name and grade point average on the label. Over the course of the year, the newsletters keep students informed of deadlines and the schedule of visits by college representatives. **Individual conferences** are held with students, and the mechanics of securing letters of recommendation and completing application forms are energetically pursued. Fee waivers are sought through the College Board fee waiver program. Financial aid workshops are offered frequently. Through the efforts of several colleges, the school sponsors tours to campuses during the spring. An awards assembly is held in June to recognize students with high academic achievement and students who are recipients of scholarships and financial aid awards.

It should be evident that this program is characterized by pragmatism. We agree that students must be helped with financial aid and with the testing and application processes. The 79% college attendance rate is evidence of the effectiveness of the program. For the first time in the history of the school, a significant proportion of the school's seniors are going to college.

Curriculum Features

Many other worthy ideas for a guidance curriculum emerged from our visits to the thirteen schools, including:

- Active collaboration with local colleges in providing students with information about colleges, financial aid, and criteria for decision-making;
- A comprehensive career explorations course for all students;
- Extensive work internship opportunities with local businesses and social service agencies;
- Special workships for women who because of their cultural setting might not otherwise consider a career or higher education;
- Active involvement of parents in workshops on college choice and financial aid;
- An organized summer academic program to ensure that students are not disqualified from college for a lack of particular college-preparatory courses.

The sequence of activities for a school must be adapted to the specific needs and goals of student and family. Within this variation across schools, however, we believe that two ideas are fundamental to an effective approach.

First, the developmental nature of student learning, especially with respect to the capacity for making sound decisions, must be acknowledged. This means that each school year requires different emphases and goals. Second, because the decisions and tasks are difficult and aspirations are often low or unrealistic, it is essential to start early in the developmental process. There is much to be accomplished and starting in the eleventh grade is too late to assure the best results.

We recommend that the discussion of careers and college begin in the ninth grade and embrace study skills, self awareness, and assessment. Then it can move on to give students an understanding of the real world around them and how to make effective decisions about it. One of these effective decisions involves the financial imperatives that govern college choice. Finally the program should turn to the matter of college identification, selection, and ultimately the decision to attend.

SUPPORT NETWORKS: STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND TEACHERS

College counseling programs cannot function effectively without the willing collaboration of students, parents, and teachers. First, as we were told many times, each of these constituencies has a personal stake in the college decision. The self-image, aspirations, and fears of parents and teachers, as well as students, are tied to how students plan and decide their future. Second, each group is a direct participant in the educational process. It is essential that parents and teachers work in concert with students and the college counselor as college decisions are made. Third, in the complex environment of the school, college counselors are politically vulnerable. They need resources, cooperation, and time from others. Also, when something does go wrong or someone criticizes some aspect of the program, the college counselor needs others who understand the program well enough to defend it. Thus, political support from students, parents, and teachers, and administrators enables the counselor to carry forth with a degree of security.

We found that effective college counseling programs mesh students, parents, and teachers into the college decision process. Each constituency warrants a brief discussion.

Students

We made the point in an earlier section that an effective counselor is an ally of the student. Obviously, if students do not participate enthusiasically in college counseling, the program has little chance of success. With a goal of establishing a solid tie to students, counselors can develop relationships in four basic ways:

- They make themselves accessible. This usually means creating an office atmosphere that is inviting and not forbidding.
- They carry out educational activities (such as one-on-one conferences and workshops) that are interesting and rewarding to students.
- They provide an unremitting flow of relevant information and are not bashful about "nagging" students to meet deadlines.

- They use a variety of strategies, such as awards assemblies and private pats on the back, to make students feel good about themselves.

When we heard students report that the college counselor "is always there" or "makes me feel less scared" or "always seems willing to go out of his way to help," we usually found that students were committed to and involved in the college counseling program.

One serious concern is that in many schools there is a substantial proportion of students who are outside the mainstream of the college counseling process. Frequently, these are students from lower income families with no prior experience with higher education. These students and their parents are often less assertive and less comfortable with school professionals and their programs. The approach of many programs in the country was captured in the comment of a student: "The guidance department is great if you're already motivated." Another college-bound student noticed that they "concentrate on those they are sure are going to college."

John Goodlad argues in *A Place Called School* that equality of access to knowledge within a school is an important determinant of equity and opportunity. An important question is whether (by the way services are organized and offered) a college counseling program reinforces discriminatory practices in a school. As a practical matter, are services equally accessible to lower income, minority, and non-college-bound students and parents? In many schools, the answer is clearly in the negative.

Interestingly, we found that exemplary schools serving the largest proportions of lower income students are the most aggressive and resourceful in eliciting student involvement. The inner city schools in California and Texas and the rural schools in West Virginia and Maine throw their nets widely, perhaps because they have no choice if they are to have a college counseling program. We also discerned a genuine moral commitment to expand opportunity and aspirations among these student populations. Still, we identified many inherent limitations in these schools, particularly the lack of resources to devote to the task and the ingrained patterns of behavior among many students and their families. Under these conditions, the progress that these schools have made is admirable.

We are less complimentary of those schools and communities with sufficient resources to make an energetic attempt to involve less privileged students in the college decision process but have not done so. Perhaps on sound philosophical grounds, most college counseling programs utilize their limited resources to benefit the maximum number of students. In these schools, the obvious path (which often corresponds to the path of least resistance) is to serve well those students already inclined in the direction of higher education. The problem lies with the priorities of the community and the school. Will a community be prepared to risk its reputation and invest money and time toward these ends? Few middle and upper income communities, it seems, are truly inclined in this direction.

Parents

Like students, parents have direct concern with the college decision process. Ironically, parents of students in lower income schools as well as parents of students in independent schools (which often attract upper income stud-

ents) tend to defer to the school on matters of running the counseling program. Whether based on faith in the school or distance from it, these parents are usually prepared to abide by the advice of the college counselors.

Upper income *public* institutions, however, are a different matter. Parents are extensively involved in schools in California, Michigan, Ohio, Virginia and Pennsylvania. In these schools, we heard highly involved parents express concern about the selectivity of colleges, about the expense of college, and on occasion, about the limitations of the college counseling office. Unlike lower income schools where counselors must seek out the parents, parents at these schools seek—sometimes demand—access to the college counseling program. For the college counselor, this has some positive aspects (parents are ready to contribute time and resources to the counseling effort) and some negative aspects (college counseling is under the spotlight of a critical audience).

The prudent college counselor takes active steps to inform parents and involve them in the college decision process. Several schools we visited send surveys to parents to elicit information about their son or daughter and about the parents' goals. Schools urge parents to be present at the junior year conferences about college selection. The college counseling program works collaboratively with parents in sponsoring workshops, building scholarship funds, and visiting colleges. Influenced by the dynamic leadership of one college counselor, parents publish a college newsletter, sponsor a banquet for new ninth graders, run a fund raiser for special office equipment and materials, and organize an open house for all parents in the fall. These active parents report that they "have access here and they are not intimidated by the school." In sum, we found that parent involvement is likely to (1) improve the probability that students will make sound decisions and (2) bring otherwise unavailable resources to the counseling program.

Teachers

Finally, teachers are essential collaborators in the college counseling process. Effective counselors rely on teachers to:

- Write recommendations;
- Emphasize the importance of going to college;
- Set academic standards that are consistent with college admission and success;
- Advise students about college options;
- Serve as role models for students; and
- Participate in educational programs, such as career explorations units.

We discovered that the effective head college counselor will recruit as allies a core of several teachers. These teachers, usually responsible for upper level courses, serve each of the above roles and are able to influence less enthusiastic colleagues.

It is useful to educate teachers about college selection and involve them in the admissions process. A counselor in Ohio with access to a word proces-

sor sends information about students to teachers and often types their recommendation letters. Other counselors take teachers with them on college visits. Several counselors have convinced English instructors to help students by assigning essays about personal values and goals. These assignments, in turn, enable students to write more effective college application essays. Involving teachers in the college counseling effort is not a difficult task; it is more a matter of deciding to do it.

In this section, we have discussed ways to develop effective working relationships with students, parents, and teachers. This is an area of fundamental importance to effective college counseling. Each of these groups has a stake; each is involved in the educational process; and each is able to contribute a great deal to reaching program goals. Also, each group (especially parents and teachers) is in a position to exert *inappropriate* influences over the college decision process. Only by working together with them can counselors secure and channel the support they need to operate efficiently .

FINANCIAL AID INITIATIVES

In recent years, financial aid education and planning has become an area of central importance to college counseling. In the absence of financial assistance, rising college tuitions would virtually prevent lower and middle income students from attending most colleges. Upper income families feel the pinch too, especially insofar as college attendance may radically alter how families spend their disposal income. As a result of these developments, one cannot talk about college without talking about money.

The paradox in the current situation, according to college counselors, is that college is affordable for almost any student. They argue that there are sufficient federal, state, and institutional financial aid and scholarship programs to enable every qualified student to attend an "appropriate" college. Also, while the dreams of students and parents may still produce an unresolveable conflict between institutional cost and ability to mobilize financial resources, more and more research is suggesting that many selective colleges and universities *are* affordable.

A crucial task of the college counselor is to convince students that, as one counselor put it, "you can find a good college you can afford." Another counselor's first message to low income parents in a rural West Virginia community is, "Don't worry about the money." Indeed, until lower income parents and students are truly convinced that financial obstacles are surmountable, they are unlikely to think seriously about college attendance. The task that flows from this message is to provide practical help to students and parents in fiscal planning. Our investigation showed that effective counselors are adept in three areas: (1) analyzing student financial need, (2) assuring that all necessary forms and applications are completed in a timely and accurate manner, and (3) implementing strategies for finding money.

Counselors in California and Texas have secured small programmable calculators that use the uniform methodology of the College Scholarship Service to calculate financial need. This approach adds credibility and reliability to planning. In some schools, it is not unusual for a counselor to visit

parents in their homes to discuss financial need. All of these discussions depend on the ability of the counselor to overcome the very natural psychological barrier to talking openly about personal income. This is where the interpersonal skills of an experienced counselor are especially useful.

Workshops are an effective means for helping students and parents search for sources of financial aid and learning about the complications of the application process. It is crucial, however, that workshops and other such events are held at times that meet the schedules of working mothers and fathers. We commend several schools that open their college counseling offices on selected evenings and on Saturday morning.

A high school in Virginia has taken the step of creating a full-time position for coordinating the financial and scholarship area. This newly appointed staff member has begun by learning as much as possible from other communities and schools and by initiating a quarterly newsletter. The school is now participating in a national group looking at innovative ways to recruit scholarship money from community sources. Recognizing the importance of financial aid for a school serving a considerable number of low income families, the school principal and the local superintendant were instrumental in finding creative avenues for funding this position.

If a college counseling program is to have a practical outcome for students, financial aid must be a major area of effort and initiative. Exemplary programs recognize this necessity and develop expertise and effective practices. The indelible fact is that, in the final stages of the college decision process, it is the availability of financing that enables the dreams of students and parents to come true.

THE COLLEGE CONNECTION

College counselors realize that they need information from colleges to do their job in an effective manner. This information concerns admissions criteria, financial aid availability and procedures, and the academic and social environment of the campus. Gaining access to this information is an important goal of high schools. The easiest avenue is through the publications of colleges and of the producers of the various college guides. Beyond such formal and limited sources, visits to and from colleges are crucial.

Fortunately, the exchange of information and influence is a matter of mutual self-interest for high schools and colleges. Most colleges want students who are strong academically, will bring cultural diversity, will use the college's academic and human resources fully, and will otherwise bring distinction to the campus. As enrollments have dipped on many campuses, several hundred colleges have begun to make an appeal for any qualified student. On the other side of the ledger, high schools see college placement as an important part of their mission. Most schools are trying both to increase the number of students going on to college and to place higher percentages of students in more selective colleges. In a phrase, colleges and schools need each other.

The resourceful college counselor is adept at calling on college admissions offices for help. This assistance from the colleges takes many forms: (1)

attendance of college representatives at local college fairs; (2) visits to schools to present information about the college; (3) implementation of financial aid workshops; (4) sponsorship of visits by students to college campuses; (5) advice on strategies for gaining admission to a particular college; (6) advocacy of a particular school as a source of solid students. What many college counselors do not realize is that most colleges are enthusiastic about collaborating with a school on such activities. Our visits demonstrated that developing close ties with colleges takes only a modicum of effort and diplomacy on the part of the college counselor. Most colleges will not risk saying "no" to a reasonable request.

We found that a few schools had unusually close relationships with particular colleges. One school draws on representatives from local two-year colleges to help seniors plan their college program and social adjustment. An inner city California school gets financial support from several colleges in the San Francisco area to charter a bus and visit eight universities over a four day period. A Michigan school participates with other high schools and a university in a summer program to train lower income students in study skills and important academic areas.

The support that some high schools receive from unusually strong state university systems may be seen to have liabilities. In one California school, a parents group has been formed with the purpose of expanding student horizons beyond the state system. They argue that the assistance received from the universities channels students in a provincial direction.

In sum, the interaction between the college and the high school is the life blood of the college admissions staff as well as the high school college counselors. If the high school student is to be exposed to colleges and be in a position to make sound decisions, the counselor must draw on the colleges for help. There are some dangers to beware of but, wisely handled, the relationship can be mutually beneficial and satisfying.

The premise of this section is that, regardless of what else is going on in the school and community, a college counseling program must develop practices that are effective and relevant to the conditions at hand. These practices are the core of the professional responsibilities of the college counselor. We found four areas of practice that are associated with exemplary college counseling: the guidance curriculum; collaboration with students, parents, and teachers; financial aid; and relationships with colleges and universities.

Our investigation indicates that distinction in these areas is not beyond the reach of any high school. The essential ingredients are commitment, adequate but not great resources, and skill and sensitivity on the part of the college counselor. Most schools are endowed with—or have the potential of developing—each of these ingredients.

VI

College Counseling and Schooling in America

We live in a diverse and dynamic society that continually confronts serious challenges. It is abundantly clear that America's youth are deeply immersed in both the promises and the problems of our culture. As such, some disturbing realities threaten our aspirations for the future. We know that youth must cope with difficult conditions that are not of their own making:

- They may live in conditions of poverty and unemployment.
- They may live in homes broken by divorce or death.
- They may have parents who are illiterate.
- They may have a native language other than English.
- They may have a physical or learning disability.
- They may live with people who abuse alcohol or drugs.
- They may face racial prejudice and discrimination.

As complex and imbedded as these circumstances may be, the schools of America are called upon to educate every youth that enters their portals. Furthermore, the school is expected to remedy many of these problematic conditions. As Diane Ravitch remarked in her 1982 examination of the social purposes of schooling, *The Troubled Crusade*, our country "long ago decided, without too much discussion of the matter, that education would be the best vehicle through which to change society."

In our visits across the country, we found schools struggling successfully to cope with the circumstances facing their students. Academic preparation as well as social assimilation and upward mobility are joined with the missions of these schools. While success remains elusive on many fronts, these schools are unavoidably involved in the problems and purposes of the wider society.

College Counseling: Bridge to the Future

Situated at the juncture of the academic and the personal lives of students, we found that the counseling office is central to the mission and life of the school. Looking more specifically at the college counseling process, we found that the counseling office is strategically located at the convergence of student, school, family, and societal aspirations. For a variety of reasons, progression to college remains a fundamental goal of secondary education. Furthermore, we found that each of the interested constituencies desires that college counseling be carried out in an effective and humane manner.

Through the National College Counseling Survey, the Exemplary School Study, and our school visits, we attempted to find out what elements are associated with the best college counseling. At this time we can report three major findings:

- The quality of college counseling is shaped significantly by the environment of the school and of the community. The goals and needs of the community, the purposes of the principal, and the personal qualities of the counselors help define both the limits and the possibilities of college counseling.

- There are several college counseling practices that are consistently associated with excellence, including a guidance curriculum, networks of support, financial aid initiatives, and productive relationships with colleges. This report, we believe, has identified useful approaches and practices in each of these areas.

- There is strong evidence that aspects of the environment as well as the practices of the college counseling program can be influenced by purposeful educational leaders. In this regard, the leaders of greatest consequence are the school principal and the head college counselor. Where we found purposeful leaders, we found schools that are improving the quality of the educational experience and enhancing the future possibilities of their students. With principals and counselors at the forefront of activity and progress, these schools are carrying out the activist mandate called for by America's reformers.

Vocational Education

In conveying our findings, however, we have only briefly mentioned some important topics. For example, the role of a vocational curriculum in school warrants more extensive analysis. We found schools where vocational education serves as a valuable preparatory step for the transition to college (especially to two-year colleges). An Hispanic school in Texas and a rural school in Maine offer excellent examples of this dynamic role. However, we found evidence of other schools where vocational education serves to sidetrack students who may appear to lack the resources and inspiration to go beyond the limitations of their immediate environment. We need to know more about the sources of these discrepancies and their remedies.

New Technologies

Although we found that new technologies were secondary to other factors in explaining exemplary college counseling, schools *are* beginning to make excellent use of computer and video disk technologies. Computers provide easily accessible information about colleges, facilitate financial aid analysis, and help an office organize and manage its information bank about students and college admissions. A creative counselor from Ohio studied at Harvard during the summer and developed a computerized data base to track the records of his students as they applied to particular colleges. This is a valuable tool in helping future students and parents look realistically at the college options they have, and it demonstrates the kind of initiatives taken by many counselors to enhance their effectiveness.

Special Student Needs

Another area demanding attention is the emphasis in some schools on meeting the needs of special student groups, such as the learning disabled, students for whom English is a second language, the gifted, and the cultur-

ally and economically disadvantaged. On the latter issue, we recommend the reader's attention to the work of the West Virginia Scholars Academy, a state-wide program that provides a bridge to college opportunities for students with outstanding college potential. We met several superbly talented students in a West Virginia school who, because of this program, will become the first members of their families to attend college.

Transition Programs

Finally, it is important to mention the efforts of several high schools to prepare students for the next step in their lives, whether this involves going directly to work or furthering their education. A school in Michigan sponsors sessions in the spring, called "Breaking Away," which address the anxieties and challenges of arriving at a college campus or a place of employment. Several schools bring back recent alumni to discuss the experience of making the transition to college or to full-time work. We believe that high schools, colleges, and employers need to cooperate more effectively in easing the transition of students to new environments.

STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE: RECOMMENDATIONS

As a school looks to improve its college counseling, we urge school leaders to pay attention to the seven areas identified in this report:

- The community context,
- The qualities of the counselor,
- The role of the principal,
- The guidance curriculum,
- Networks of support within the school,
- Financial aid initiatives, and
- Productive relationships with colleges.

Outstanding achievement in these areas can help high school communities "build better bridges" for their youth as they make the difficult and confusing transition to post-secondary education.

In addition, our work uncovered numerous specific steps that can help a school get started in a progressive direction. What follows are our recommendations for building a model college counseling program. The more of these steps taken, the more likely a school will be able to attain distinction in its college counseling.

Make college counseling part of a long-term guidance curriculum.

The schools we visited with the highest degree of "customer satisfaction" begin their programs in the lower grades. Several have a formal curriculum with a progression of skills and self-awareness exercises which proceed through the grades to bring students to a point of self-awareness and maturity that equips them to deal with the transition to college.

Relate college counseling to other counseling in the school.

College counselors should integrate themselves with academic counseling as much as possible, so that they can be perceived in their true role as educators and not viewed merely as "agents" for students applying to college. We found that college counselors were successful primarily because they were identified first with the school's commitment to academic excellence, and only secondarily, as assistants to the college bound.

Pick the right people.

More than one superintendent or principal, when asked about their college counseling program, said, "You have to find people who genuinely like kids," "are good organizers," and "are willing to try new things." For the most part the "right people" we met were enormously devoted to their work: they spent long hours at their jobs, arriving as early as 6:30 a.m. for appointments with students and families, and staying as late as 9:00 p.m. for the same purpose. There were others who contributed their political energy and knowhow. But above and beyond any of the qualities of dedication to the job, hard work, generosity, and political savvy should be the capacity to care about kids.

Let the setting send your message.

The college guidance office should be a cheerful and orderly place, since the first attitude students should develop toward the college admissions process is that it *can* be approached systematically and faced with maturity and good cheer. In promoting a positive atmosphere, some counselors may favor flowering plants, others, college pennants, plaques honoring students, or maps with colored pins to denote where the graduates of the school are currently attending college. In the exemplary schools we visited, college catalogs were arranged in a clear and orderly fashion, audiovisual equipment had easy access, students were visibly welcomed, and the atmosphere was cordial.

Enlist the faculty.

Dynamic college counseling cannot exist without the support and assistance of a high school faculty. Able counselors always had at least a small core of teachers they had recruited to help them counsel students bound for college. Faculty members can be asked to talk in class about their own college experiences and the rationale for going to college. They should be encouraged to write comprehensive letters of recommendations; many schools had workshops for faculty on writing recommendations.

Involve the parents.

Whatever the extent and nature of parent involvement is, it is important that the end result be the attitude conveyed by one parent who said to us: "They keep us informed so we can all work together." Most schools have a Parents' Night, and this usually commences the college relationship be-

tween the guidance office and the family. These orientation meetings should be straightforward and factual in content. Workshops have been found particularly useful especially for the dissemination of information about college and financial aid. College admissions and financial aid officers are often willing to run these workshops and to engage in individual discussions with parents. "Parent Support Group" is a rather formal name for what is often an informal network of parents who advise and assist the college counselor in widening the horizons of students, sponsoring programs for students, and developing scholarships for worthy students.

Most vigorous counseling programs have established procedures for meeting directly with parents and helping them, emotionally and financially, plan for the college aspirations of their children. Some counselors make visits to students' homes, usually to help parents with financial aid concerns. At least, parents should be invited to the school for a conference with the counselor. Early morning and evening conferences show parents the school's respect for their schedules. The results of these meetings invariably help families come to grips with the realities of the college admissions process and understand that the counselor is really working for their child.

Maintain effective communication with students and parents.

Good counseling programs are marked by efficient and clear communication, with a good deal of attention paid to printed communications with students and families. Several schools send out monthly newsletters on the college admissions process delineating: deadlines that are coming up; practicalities such as assembling applications, answering the questions on them, and mailing them on time; practical advice on visiting colleges; and financial aid matters. Many of the guidance offices we visited had developed their own pamphlet or booklet for the college-bound senior. In addition to providing advice on assessing oneself, searching for colleges and procuring and filling out applications, the booklets also explained the role of the counselor and the counseling office.

Celebrate student achievement.

In nearly every school we visited, various forms of recognition and award helped to build students' self-confidence and self-esteem. Bulletin boards were covered with news stories and pictures of former graduates. Counseling offices sponsored Awards Days where awards were given out not only for victories on the athletic field or in the classroom, but for "most improved," "best effort," and "most valuable to the team." When individual students won awards, counselors made sure that the press was called, the principal summoned, and pictures taken. For a school community to feel good about itself, most of the population must experience success.

Stay close to the administration.

We observed cooperative and cordial relationships between counselors and their superiors. Effective counselors engage in planning with the principal and the school staff. Maintaining liaison with principals involves apprising them early of anticipated needs, especially of a financial nature. Except in

rare circumstances, the prudent counselor works within the school's system of decision-making and influence. An example of an effective cooperative venture was a counselor in Michigan who, lacking financial aid calculators, sought the permission of her principal to approach local banks with a proposal for them to donate the calculators to the school. The principal assented and put out word to friends in the business community. The counselor now has half a dozen calculators, and the banks have agreed to buy new programs for them annually.

Involve the colleges.

Enterprising counselors enlist the aid of the bright and energetic cadre of admissions officers, which most colleges have. They also ask colleges to conduct special programs on high school campuses. Soliciting collegiate advice on writing school recommendations, developing clear transcripts, dealing with parents, and improving the quality of faculty recommendations can help the counselor do a better job.

Make use of programs to meet special needs.

Beyond the regular responsibilities of college counseling lie the particular needs of sub-groups of the school with special needs. We found a variety of special programs that energetic counselors had either designed or appropriated to serve those needs.

- SAT preparation is a natural extension of the functions of the college counseling office. Many schools have designed their own programs, some with the help of outside consultants. If such programs are restricted in scope and primarily serve students with special needs, they can serve to enhance the role of the counseling office without giving inordinate attention to the "testing game."

- Upward Bound programs for needy and talented minority students expose them to skill-building and enrichment courses as well as provide consistent support and attention.

- Talent Search programs, such as the Johns Hopkins Talented Youth Program, focus on advanced study in all the major disciplines including the performing arts.

- Collateral programs for parents and the non-college bound, such as Project STAY, can bring special instructors to the school to tutor the most needy students.

- Programs can be developed to help students face the transition from high school to college or work. Career counseling and transition workshops are two areas where counselors can offer concrete advice on how to cope with the confusion and sense of loss during the first few weeks of college or work. We found that many counselors make use of alumni to talk to seniors about college and work.

Our visits began in January at an inner-city school in Los Angeles; they ended in May at a school in a rural, economically-depressed area of Maine. As we turned to leave the counselor's office in Maine, at the end of our last day, we heard the strains of "Pomp and Circumstance." The Seniors were practicing for graduation, scarcely a week away. Groups of students, secretaries, and teachers gathered at the doorways of the darkened gym to witness the rehearsal. One could sense amidst the strains of the familiar melody, the caring and mutual respect that binds this school and this community together. We left quietly, inspired by the opportunity we had to visit this and other excellent schools across the country.

Each of our recommendations represents a pathway to excellence. In the final analysis, however, we found that the route to excellence may be more simply stated. We found excellence where college counselors and principals have taken a philosophical leap away from the day-to-day crises and obstacles. By whatever impulse, these educators have moved to a more encompassing and profound sense of purpose. In every case, this purpose involves broadening opportunities—frontiers of possibility—for students.

Excellence is, above all, a matter of committing oneself genuinely to this goal. From there, the skills and experience of the college counselor can begin to have practical effect. We have seen that remarkable things are happening in our schools. We urge others to follow.

National College Counseling Project

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